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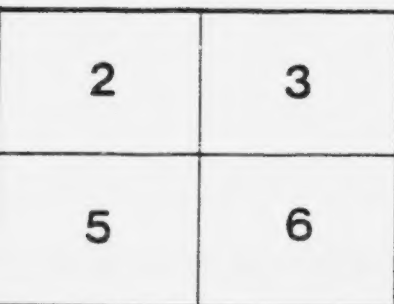
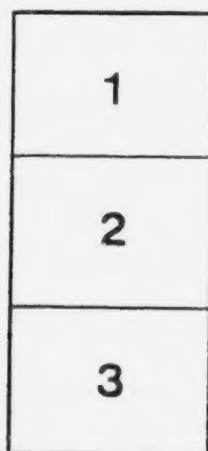
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**MADAME, WILL
YOU WALK?**

BETH ELLIS

MADAME, WILL YOU WALK?

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

Crown 8vo, 6s.

**BARBARA WINSLOW,
REBEL.**

Second Impression.

WM. BLACKWOOD AND SONS,
EDINBURGH AND LONDON.

MADAME, WILL YOU WALK?

BY

BETH ELLIS

AUTHOR OF

'AN ENGLISH GIRL'S FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF BURMAH,'

'BARBARA WINSLOW; REBEL'

SECOND IMPRESSION

TORONTO

WILLIAM BRIGGS

EDINBURGH AND LONDON

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Dedicated

TO

ALL MERRY LOVERS WHO DANCE
TO THE PIPE OF DAN CUPID
IN HOLIDAY MOOD



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MADAME, WILL YOU WALK?

*I will give you a pink silk gown
That you may be fine when you go to town.
Madame, will you walk? Madame, will you talk?
Madame, will you walk and talk with me?*

*Tho' you give me a pink silk gown
That I may be fine when I go to town,
No, I will not walk. No, I will not talk.
No, I will not walk nor talk with thee.*

*I will give you a coach and six
With fine black horses as black as pitch,
Madame, will you walk? Madame, will you talk?
Madame, will you walk and talk with me?*

*Though you give me a coach and six
With fine black horses as black as pitch,
Yet I will not walk. No, I will not talk.
No, I will not walk nor talk with thee.*

*I will give you the keys of my heart,
And we will be wedded till death us do part.
Madame, will you walk? Madame, will you talk?
Madame, will you walk and talk with me?*

*You shall give me the keys of your heart,
And we will be wedded till death us do part.
Yes, I will walk. Yes, I will talk.
Yes, I will walk and talk with thee.*

—OLD SONG.



MADAME, WILL YOU WALK?

CHAPTER I.

MISS PAMELA PLUNKETT'S GLOVE.

WHO has not heard of that strange frolic, so wittily recorded by Mr Pope, when Lord Petre stole a lock of Miss Arabella Fermor's hair? Yet all have not heard whence the affair sprang,—of those wagers of Lord Wildmore, to wit, which furnished the town with gossip during the zenith of the summer of 1712, until the French scandal of that year in its turn diverted the talk into another channel.

For my lord, it should be known, ever alert to the comedies of life, and finding the world wag for a time too slowly and sagely for his humour, had offered to forfeit one hundred guineas to whomsoever, at the month's end, should produce a token of favour gained from one or other of those whom he named the ten fairest and proudest women in London town. Nor was there lack of ready response, ten distinct even wagers being the result, my lord consoling himself with the additional reflection that there was prospect, even though he lost each and all, of ample amusement for his guineas. Thus were begotten ten comedies, yet not devoid in one instance of tragedy, with a touch thereof also in another, if tragedy there may be in such commonplace as a woman's breaking heart. But for the most part were they comedies, and much amusement would lie in the hearing of them all, though all may not be recounted in so dainty a strain as the tale of fair Belinda's tress.

By none was so complete success attained as by Mr Patrick Fytech, who had claimed, as it were out of bravado, the task of securing a token from the hand of Miss Pamela Plunkett, one of the fairest, as unquestionably she was one of the proudest, of women. Yet the seeming untameableness of her spirit, the daring of her dalliance, and the virgin coldness of her heart, were elements attractive to the gambler in a world full of women craving to be won.

The stakes being laid, and the ladies apportioned, the game began, before a world ready to help, or handicap, wherever a whisper or a scandal would serve, and eager to find amusement at every turn.

It was Lady Betty Acton who first heard of the monstrous exploit. Of what did she not hear? For her woman was pledged to Lord Wildmore's gentleman, and who so knowing a gossip as he? Some, indeed, aver that Lord Wildmore himself carried the tale to her ladyship, foreseeing there would be better sport if the quarry were warned. But Lady Betty having, from whatever was the source, been informed of the matter, summoned forthwith each lady concerned to drink tea with her, and to learn what was toward.

Picture then the scene when the rival beauties were assembled! What scornful smiles, what honeyed sarcasms, what sugared pills of rival feminine intercourse, while the hostess waited, endeavouring to keep the peace, until all were arrived, and she might with fit solemnity warn them of the plot!

And wait she must, for Miss Pamela Plunkett stayed her coming. Always last at a rendezvous, she was later even than usual, and her rivals had almost wearied of enlarging upon her follies, when at length she appeared, slightly flushed and overwrought, and sinking dramatically upon a chair, called for salts, fans, and feathers to restore her shattered nerves.

"Oh lud! Betty!" she gasped, as Lady Betty hurried amazedly to her side, "I am vastly distressed to be so late, but I have met with an adventure."

An adventure! What tossing of curls, what raising of

eyebrows, what meaning smiles, as the assembled ladies crowded round Miss Pamela to hear her story.

"'Tis inconceivable that such things should be, in daylight and in town, yet it is true. I came in a hired chair, and as we crossed the Park four ruffians suddenly set upon us. The chairmen fled, leaving me to the mercy of the villains. I was so frightened I vow I could not even scream. One fellow snatched my chain, another seized my wrist, they would have taken all I had, myself too, perchance, when——"

"Yes—yes!" gasped the expectant listeners, "what followed?"

"A rescue! I do not know whence he sprang, but in an instant he was at my side and his sword out. The rascals were quickly out of sight, and my preserver, having called up the chairmen, who lay in hiding behind the bushes, escorted me hither in safety."

"Who was he? A stranger? Did you not inquire his name?"

"Oh, no stranger. I have met him before. It was a gentleman but lately come from Ireland, Mr Patrick Fytech——Lud, Betty! what's amiss?——" she broke off suddenly, for at the name Lady Betty Acton, with a short hysterical laugh, dropped the bottle of salts from her hand.

"I protest, Pamela, I don't credit your tale," she gasped. "You are making sport of us."

"Betty!" cried the heroine of the moment, reproachfully. "May I become hideous if it be not the whole truth. It is scarce conceivable, but it is true."

"Most inconceivable," agreed Lady Clarissa Winston, with meaning emphasis.

"To be sure," remarked La'ly Sybilla dreamily, "one has read in the romances of ladies forcibly abducted."

"Assuredly," agreed the fair Cecilia vindictively; "not infrequently, too, with the lady's consent."

"I heard a strange story t'other day," continued Miss Fernor, "of a certain lady hiring footpads to stop her coach, that she might have opportunity to call to her rescue one with whom she desired to be better acquainted."

"A strange story, indeed," mused Lady Clarissa. "I

trust, Miss Pamela, you will find means to recover the stolen chain."

Such innuendoes had a more recuperative effect upon Pamela than all the salts and vinegar ever compounded. Instantly she was seated bolt upright, withering her rivals with glances which appraised and condemned every article of their attire.

"I thank you, madame," she answered icily, "the chain was of little value. I thank the Fates I lost nothing more precious in the adventure — neither my heart, hair, nor complexion."

The fair Clarissa flushed with rage, for all the world knew that when her barge was lately upset on the river, her ladyship's loss of the two latter commodities had been considerable, though, considering their nature, not irreplaceable.

But here Lady Betty, noting the danger-signals flung out in many cheeks, hastily intervened, inviting all to listen to the reason why she had summoned them together; and at her first few words the threatening enmities were merged in a common bond of indignation at the audacity of Man. Soft voices shrilled with rage, bright eyes flashed, fair bosoms heaved with fury; each lady, by the very ecstacy of her contempt, endeavouring to prove the folly of any man hoping to gain a token of her favour, charm he never so wisely.

Only Dorothy Lascelles repeated softly to herself, "The ten fairest and proudest women in London," and smiled.

But of all that fluttering, agitated throng, who so contemptuous as Miss Pamela Plunkett?

"Let us be firm," she pleaded in her eagerness. "It is but for three weeks, surely we will all resist till the month is out. No one could be such a simpleton as to give way. We will show our favours are not so lightly won."

Her assurance roused the others to a measure of enthusiasm (or of emulation), and instinctively they turned to her for leadership. Her tongue lashed scornfully at any suggestion of surrender; her eyes flashed merciless contempt for any indication of wavering in the fight. Yet she knew well the weakness of her sex.

"It will be wisest to ignore them utterly," she decreed. "They will besiege us, follow us, lay snares for us, be ever at our heels, pleading, beseeching. Let us ignore their very existence till the time is out."

"We will! We will!" cried her enthusiastic followers.

"Let us stand together and oppose an unbroken front."

"We will!"

"Let us—— Betty!" she broke off suddenly, "you have not told us who have ta'en up the wagers."

Lady Betty Acton, who had sat silent, watching the scene with a mischievous smile, roused herself, and lifted a paper from her knee.

"As each took up the wager he chose his lady from Lord Wildmore's list," she explained. "These are the names."

Then followed an indescribable scene; cheeks flushing with pleasure, haply deemed indignation, lips smiling with amusement thinly disguised as scorn, eyes flashing with satisfaction veiled discreetly from view, cries of anger breaking into laughs as the names were disclosed.

Pamela watched her companions with mingled anxiety and anger, and waited with calm and haughty mien to learn her special foe; but at the name of "Mr Patrick Fyche" she turned to Lady Betty a face of utter horror, and sinking back into her chair dropped her fan with a loud clatter to the floor.

Fortunately her companions had no leisure to notice her sudden collapse; indeed, the great news of the wager had driven all recollection of her adventure from their minds.

"Are you not concerned in the affair, madame?" asked Lady Clarissa in surprise, as Lady Betty laid down the paper.

Lady Betty smiled.

"'Tis well known," she answered proudly, "that Lady Betty Acton reserves her favours for one man—her husband."

Lady Clarissa glanced at her neighbour with a covert smile, for it was maliciously whispered that Lady Betty's dutiful conduct towards her husband was but wisdom, his devotion to her hiding a jealousy she were rash to rouse.

But evening was drawing near, the hour approached for the

divine service of curling-iron and powder-box, preparatory to the evening rout, and with mutual vows of fortitude the company at length dispersed, to prepare themselves by contemplation of their mirrors for the coming contest.

Only the fair Pamela remained, seated stiffly upright in her chair, the anger and desperation ever deepening in her eyes.

Lady Betty, looking at her, laughed softly.

"I protest, Pamela," she urged, "you seem vastly affected at mention of Mr Fytch. A malicious tongue might vow you had lost your heart to him already."

Pamela groaned.

"Betty," she murmured despairingly, "what can be done? What can be done?"

Lady Betty stared at her curiously.

"By my petticoat, Pam, what's amiss? Do you dream you are bound in gratitude to reward the man for his action to-day by a token of your favour? Tut, girl, it called for no valour to drive off half-a-dozen rascals who would run at the sight of a sword. Besides, Pam, it's like enough the fellows knew their duty to the hand that paid them. Remember he had already embarked upon his quest; he took on the wager yesterday, and—he's an Irishman."

"Oh, I know, I know," moaned Pamela. "Oh, but these men are amazing. Betty, what can I do?"

"Why do anything?" asked Betty in amazement.

"Because—because—oh, Betty!" she cried, clasping her hands in desperation, "'tis done already!"

"Pamela!"

"I knew nothing of the wager, Betty, and he was vastly polite, and his eyes looked——! And so, being, as you must admit, under an obligation to him, when I stepped from the chair and entered your door, I—I dropped my glove, and—and—oh, Betty! I didn't stop to pick it up."

"And he——?"

Pamela nodded.

Then Lady Betty leaned her head against the high-backed chair and laughed outright. But Pamela shook her head reproachfully.

"Betty, you must help me," she cried. "Think what will be said. Why, the man has won his wager already! Every coffee-house will know of it to-night. Clarissa Winston and Arabella——oh, Betty! Betty, what shall I do?"

"Come, Pamela," Lady Betty resumed briskly, "it is not so bad as that. The game is not lost until the month's end. If in three weeks we cannot gain back the glove by some means, may I never again wear hoop or powder."

"But how?"

"Lad! is not everything possible? Are we not women? But be prudent, Pam. See that he does not steal something more."

But Pamela treated the suggestion with a smile of calm disdain.

When the defiant Pamela entered Lady Hopewood's rooms some hours later, she found the world already full of whispers. The terms of the wager had become known, and all men were eager to see the comedy played out.

As for those ladies less favoured, or maybe less notorious than the Chosen Ten, how their lips curved with scorn, their eyebrows spoke wonder too deep for words, their eyes shot envious darts upon the Chosen Ten, the "fairest and proudest women in London," as these, glorious in all the armour of their beauty, conscious to the very finger-tips of their fame, sat apart together, waiting with calm converse and gently waving fans for the first attack.

Waiting!

One by one the daring foe appeared, sauntering through the crowd with easy nonchalance, exchanging here a smile, there a glance, now a light jest, anon a grave salute, as though unconcerned with that phalanx of beauty waiting all armoured for the attack.

Three of the wagers at length sat down to ombre, others retired to more exciting play. Lord Petre and Sir Harry Ford devoted themselves to the entertainment of a fair bevy of ladies, Viscount Bolingbroke flitted from group to group,

breathing light fancies into willing ears. Mr Fytch stood quietly aside with Lord Wildmore.

The hours passed. The air resounded with soft laughter and the tinkling of spoons. The wits exercised brain and tongue, the ladies lending ready ears and appreciative smiles to aid them in their task; the beaux ogled and flattered, to be rewarded by gentle blush and inviting droop of curved lashes, hiding, one might presume, a depth of inexpressible thought. Cupid, gauging the quality of the hearts about him, laid aside his bitter arrows, and aimed his bow with fairy shafts which might wound but for a day, sparing the victim for fresh wounds upon the morrow. Everywhere was gaiety, laughter, and merriment.

But they, the Chosen Ten!

What words can paint the storms that raged in their fair bosoms while still they sat apart, neglected, awaiting the attack which never came. Amazement, anger, foreboding, oppressed their hearts as they saw those lesser stars of beauty sparkling in the lights that were wont to shine for them alone. It was enough, indeed, to shake the stoutest heart, to daunt the resolution even of the proudest women in London, and they had hardly endured the evening through had it not been for dread of Pamela's scorn.

But that fair General—feeling so imminent the ruin of their plans, and goaded to desperation by the consciousness of Mr Fytch's calm glances, and by the knowledge of the weapon which he possessed—held her companions from retreat at the sword-point of her bitter tongue; and by the outward display of cold disdain forced them, for very shame's sake, to assume a like indifference, and to suffer these singular tactics of the enemy with calm faces, though doubtless with trembling hearts.

One trifling satisfaction the evening afforded. At Pamela's suggestion four of them arose and promenaded the rooms in couples, then, by a simultaneous advance from opposite sides of the room, they succeeded in surrounding Lord Wildmore and bringing this arch-conspirator to justice.

Peter Wildmore was blessed by heaven with a whimsical spirit. He looked upon all men as butts from which he might extract humour, and enjoyed his life, as befits a lusty

bachelor born under a dancing star and plentifully furnished with the good things of this world, with health, wealth, and friends.

But, despite the sense of chivalry which lay beneath his whimsicalities, he had a wholesome awe of the wiles of women. He appreciated the entertainment their whims and machinations afforded the onlooker, but for his part he preferred to watch them from afar, and, so far as possible, held himself aloof from their company; for women, he was wont to aver, are born with a natural craving for the ring, and every marriage leaves the world the poorer by a merry heart.

When therefore he saw the Avenging Fair bearing down upon him, his thoughts were promptly set on flight; but realising escape to be impossible, there was nothing for it but to seek to disarm their ire by gallantry.

His aspect was resolute, but his tongue betrayed his nervousness. For Lord Wildmore's speech was marred (some say marked) by a certain silent stammer, if such a term be comprehensible, a sudden check in the flow of his language, after which pause the remaining words of his sentence would rush forth impetuously, like a stream breaking its dam. This peculiarity, apparent only in moments of nervousness or excitement, had the merit of giving unexpected point at times to his remarks.

Miss Pamela Plunkett opened the attack.

"I wonder you are not ashamed to look us in the face, Lord Wildmore," she exclaimed indignantly.

"Nay, madam," he answered gallantly, "even shame shall not deprive me of so incomparable a pleasure."

"Fie, sir," cried Arabella Fermor; "do not hope that you can soothe us by gallantry."

"Gallantry is not charity," interposed Belle Steward; "it does not cover the multitude of sins."

"Yet not unlike charity in the ingratitude with which it is received," urged Lord Peter sadly.

"That you should dare to stake your guineas on——"

"On your fortitude, madame? Sure I am less to be blamed than he who has staked upon your simplicity. Why not vent your wrath upon Tom Harding there?"

As Sir Thomas Harding was at this moment diligently avoiding her company, this question somewhat nonplussed the ready-tongued Miss Steward. But Pamela again pressed to the attack.

"And pray, Lord Wildmore, what manner of favours do you deem it likely we should extend to these impertinent gamesters?"

"I hope and trust none, madame. Yet not only in my own interests would I entreat you to be—er—most circumspect. A heart, remember, may be lost as lightly as—a glove."

He spoke in all innocence, and turned to Pamela with a merry twinkle in his eyes, anticipating a fresh outburst of defiance; but to the complete amazement of her companions that usually intrepid damsel disconcertedly withdrew from the fray with the retort unspoken.

Now for three days these strange tactics were continued. Wheresoever these fairest and proudest of women went—in the Mall, on the river, to rout or ball—they went ever neglected and shorn of the attentive following over which they had been wont to hold sway. By tacit consent all men stood aside, leaving the way free for the wagers, and by tacit consent the wagers turned their backs upon the expectant Fair and left them alone.

On the fourth day, seeing ominous signs of weakness among her followers, Pamela called a council of war to devise means of disconcerting the cunning foe and to strengthen her friends' resolution by scorn of the enemy. The meeting was not characterised by marked harmony.

"Heaven keep us! what ails all the men?" muttered Miss Fermor, shaking her golden locks despairingly. "What new method of wooing is this? They will never win their wagers thus."

"Perhaps they hope to subdue the garrison by starvation," suggested Belle Steward bluntly.

"Starvation!" cried Clarissa Winston, tossing her curls. "Plague take the wretches! do they then deem we shall pine for lack of their attentions?"

"It would seem likely," said Belle, with meaning.

"Never notice them," urged Pamela. "Let us prove

to the audacious creatures we do very well without them."

"It would certainly seem that there is little need for our sturdy resistance of their attacks," said Margaret Beauchamp slyly. "For my part, I believe Lady Betty Acton is mistaken, and they have never taken up any wagers."

"Yet there is clearly something afoot," said Belle calmly, "or I had not been three days free from Mr Harding's importunities. Truly, there are compensations even in our present neglected state."

"Compensations?" cried Pamela indignantly. "Who desires compensations? For my part, I thank Heaven I am not dependent for enjoyment upon the whims of the opposite sex."

"A matter calling for most devout thankfulness in your case, my dear," said Clarissa Winston sweetly.

"For my part," said Phyllis Greville plaintively, "I am excessively dull."

"Perhaps absence is making the heart grow fonder," suggested Miss Fernor, hinting slyly at Viscount Cleeves, Miss Phyllis's challenger.

Phyllis tossed her curls. "Lud! even Viscount Cleeves's conversation were to be preferred to some company," she answered sharply.

Pamela tapped her foot impatiently on the floor.

"I marvel you will all be so simple," she cried. "Here it is plain to sight these wretches believe we cannot endure a week without their attentions. Would you let them learn that is indeed the truth? If you intend they shall win their wagers, marry! call them up, and give them your tokens forthwith. But, for heaven's sake, if you mean to withstand them, show yourselves at least indifferent to their neglect."

No fair Amazon could possibly confess herself so weak as to admit an intention to surrender: all firmly avowed their resolution to continue in their resistance.

Only Phyllis Greville added, that offering so vigorous a resistance to nothing, gave her the vapours.

Pamela smiled. "It will not be for long," she urged. "Let them but see you are indifferent; show them it is

not thus they will win favours,—I warrant they will soon change their behaviour."

Thus encouraged, they doubled their resolution against the incomprehensible attacks of the enemy. But, alas! the cunning foe knew their councils: they had marked Miss Plunkett's influence over her companions, they saw in her the chief obstacle to their success; they planned her downfall.

Upon the next day, as she walked in the Mall, Miss Pamela Plunkett found herself suddenly the centre of all gallantry. The foe had, indeed, changed their tactics. No longer did they shun the attack—rather they pressed to it with all the force of tender sighs, amorous glances, and witty compliment. But their fire was directed upon her alone. Where'er she went she found at her side ten ardent followers who clamoured for her favours, sighed at her frowns, hailed with triumph every unwilling smile that curved her lips. When before was woman so besieged? 'Twas a veritable triumph!

Yet, though 'tis ever the privilege of a leader to bear the brunt of an attack, Miss Pamela struggled desperately against her new-born honours. How could she accept them with her customary indifference, while ever conscious of the reproachful faces of her still neglected comrades? They marked this development of the campaign with looks of ever-increasing amazement and suspicion, ignoring her attempts to escape her suitors, indifferent to her apparent distress, and only noted that, while they themselves were left in solitude, she attracted the attentions that were theirs by right. Alas, for the fair Pamela! What profit now her scorn and her defiance? How could she seek to steel her comrades' hearts, seeing them now hostile? Helpless amidst the wiles of the enemy, dumb before the angry glances of her whilom friends, she incontinently fled from the field and resigned her leadership, leaving the foe in triumph to ply their arts at will upon their weaker opponents.

Tremble now, ye Chosen Ten—your bond is broken!

The following day, big with purpose, Lady Betty

Acton ordered her chair and sped to wait upon her friend.

Alack! the woeful sight, Miss Pamela Plunkett had the spleen! In most amazing disorder, with reddened eyes, uncurled locks and unbecoming gown, the distressful lady tossed upon her couch, while upon the floor beside her lay nine torn and crumpled notes. Nine notes, dainty, scented, elegant, yet breathing the sarcastic fury of outraged friendship, the ironical scorn of duped femininity; in brief, telling Miss Pamela Plunkett clearly what opinion the several writers held concerning her conduct of the previous evening; and one and all declared that she had induced them to adopt their attitude of proud disdain that she might have opportunity to draw all attentions to herself.

The terrified priestesses of this Venus, who meekly bore the brunt of their lady's fury, welcomed Lady Betty Acton with relief, and withdrew gladly from the room; but Lady Betty feared neither spleen nor vapours.

"I protest, Pam," she urged, "'tis not like you to mind a woman's tongue. Give me patience! Aren't you a woman yourself? You should know the worth of it."

Pamela roused herself.

"Lud! Betty, I care nothing for what they say now," she cried, with such a look at the crumpled notes as somewhat belied her words; "but think what will be said when they learn what Mr Fytch has won. Oh, Betty! get me back my glove again."

"Hist! Pam, it's for that I came here," answered Lady Betty mysteriously. "Are you ready for a frolic?"

"Why, what's afoot?"

"Charles and Mr Fytch ride together to Hampton this afternoon. Why may not you and I go to his room to steal back what he has stole already?"

"To his rooms!"

"Ah! then you care for those?" asked Lady Betty scornfully, crushing the scattered notes with her foot.

"Never!" cried Pamela.

Lady Betty laughed. "I've been nine months married and never a frolic," she coaxed, "and it will be so easy. My Phoebe has spoken to his man; he will let us in and

hold his tongue. Besides, I protest this Mr Fytch deserves a lesson which it were a sin not to teach."

"But he did not *steal* the glove."

"Oh, lud! if you wish him to keep it——"

"No, no!" interposed Pamela hastily, "I will change my gown; I will come."

In the course of an hour Pamela was attired to her partial satisfaction, and entering their chairs the two ladies were presently conveyed to Bond Street, and ensconced in the heart of the enemy's stronghold.

But alack! scarce ten minutes had passed, they had but rifled the contents of two drawers, had not a tithe satisfied their curiosity with regard to the pictures, books, pins, scarves, and other signs of masculine proprietorship which were scattered about the room, when Lady Acton, who had approached the window to better to examine a quaint piece of china, started back with a horrified cry, and pointed with a trembling finger to where Mr Fytch was crossing the street and approaching the house.

A moment later his voice was heard below, his step upon the stairs.

Pamela, with a cry of despair, sank into a chair and gave herself up for lost, but Lady Acton rose equal to the occasion.

Rapidly she pulled Pamela to her feet, and forced her behind one of the heavy window-curtains, she herself taking refuge behind the other a second before the door was opened and the lawful occupier strode into the room.

Mr Fytch flung off hat and coat, and crossing the floor, leant against the chimney-piece and took an idle survey of the room. It seemed to the excited ladies, covertly watching him betwixt the folds of the curtains, that his eyes rested somewhat long and curiously upon their hiding-place, but his glance passed on and they breathed again.

Then with a heavy sigh he commenced to pace the room, muttering to himself with bent head, frowning brow, and other outward tokens of a deeply dejected spirit.

"If she but loved me," he muttered, "I would die ere she should grieve!" then: "Adorable Pamela! Incomparable one!" then: "Ye Gods, why have you placed so cold a

heart in such a perfect form? Ah! cruel Pamela, who could resist you? Who shall hope to win you?"

What woman's breast had not been stirred by such undisguised proofs of devotion? Cruel god of love to take such 'vantage of this unapproachable maid. The fair Pamela watched him with tender, if somewhat complacent pity. But Lady Betty, the nine months' wedded wife, watched him with amazement, and suspicion darkened her thoughts.

At length he paused before a table upon which stood a handsome carved ivory box. Opening this, he sought among its contents, and drew thence a small white packet, delicately tied with ribbon. He gazed at it tenderly, then pressed it to his lips.

"Sweet Pamela," he cried, "this at least is all my own."

A delicious thrill melted Pamela's virgin bosom; she could not doubt what was contained within that devoutly prized packet.

Suddenly Mr Fytch's name was called loudly in the passage without, the door was flung wide, and Lord Charles Acton abruptly entered the room.

Mr Fytch quickly returned the packet to the box and turned to meet his guest with a slight shade of annoyance and anxiety in his eyes.

"What the deuce are you moping here for, Patrick?" cried Lord Charles cheerily. "I've been to White's, the Smyrna, and the Cocoa Tree, but could find no trace of you. I never thought to find you in your rooms. My fellow was mistaken, the mare is well enough, so we can set out now, and shall still reach Hampton in time. Are you ready?"

Mr Fytch hesitated.

"Sure, it's late," he muttered, "and—there is a storm coming on."

"Nonsense, man. Never was more perfect weather."

As he spoke Lord Charles strode to the window, pulled aside one of the heavy curtains, and then fell back with a cry of amazement as his wife stood revealed to his horrified gaze.

There was a moment's silence. Lord Charles' face grew white and drawn.

"What are you doing here, madame?" he said sternly.

Lady Betty stood silent, her cheeks flaming, her eyes cast down.

"What are you doing here, madame?" again thundered her outraged husband.

"I—I am hiding," answered Lady Betty in trembling tones.

"Good Lord, madame! Is that an answer? From whom were you hiding?"

"From Mr Fytch," was the trembling answer.

"Don't lie to me, madame," said Lord Charles sternly.

Then Betty raised her eyes, and behold they were sparkling with laughter. But at sight of her husband's face the laughter died away. She took a quick step to his side.

"Charles, dear," she coaxed, "'tis so simple to explain."

Lord Charles drew back.

"I am obliged, madame, but what explanation is required I will demand from Mr Fytch. Get you home."

Lady Betty sighed and shook her head over the wilfulness of men.

"But I prefer to explain myself," she urged. "Besides, Mr Fytch truly knows nothing of the matter. I—I came to seek——" she paused.

"Whom?" demanded Lord Charles sharply.

Then Lady Betty raised her head defiantly: "That I shall not tell you," she said.

"By God, madame, you shall," answered her husband grimly.

The two eyed each other keenly, then Betty's lips twitched and the laughter dimpled in her face.

"Oh, Charles dear, don't be foolish," she pleaded.

Lord Charles hesitated, eyeing his wife doubtfully. For a minute the Fates came to pause, undecided whether tragedy or comedy should be the outcome of the situation. But kindly Dame Nature interfered in favour of her better-loved Muse.

For while husband and wife stood thus, their peace in

the balance, and Mr Fytch waited doubtful when to intervene, from behind the other window-curtain came the sound of a muffled sneeze.

All three started at the sound, and turned with one accord towards the curtain, to perceive the edge of a brodered skirt which showed beneath the folds.

Lord Charles turned to Lady Betty. She was stifling her laughter in her handkerchief, but her eyes gleamed mischievously. A slow smile of comprehension dawned on his face, he took his wife's hand and raised it to his lips.

Mr Fytch stepped across the room and took up hat and coat.

"Come, Charles," he cried gaily, "shall we to Hampton?"

Lord Charles glanced meaningly from the curtain to Mr Fytch and shook his head reprovingly, then with a low chuckle of amusement followed him from the room.

Not until he reached the street did he speak.

"Pat, if you will marry a woman, marry one who can laugh."

"Shure, if the Fates be kind I'll marry one who can likewise sneeze," answered the Irishman. And so, laughing, they went their way.

Miss Pamela Plunkett emerged from her hiding-place, and dropped into a seat with a deep sigh of relief.

"Oh, Betty," she gasped, "I vow I am nearly dead."

But Lady Betty commenced to pace the room, ejaculating dramatically: "Adorable Pamela! Oh, cruel one! Oh, ye gods!" until overpowered with mirth she, too, sank upon a chair.

Pamela frowned.

"Come, Betty," she urged, "let us begone."

"Not before we have what we came to find," cried her Ladyship firmly. She took up the box and drew out the be-ribboned packet. "There is little doubt what this contains," she laughed. "Open it, Pam,—it is yours."

She tossed the packet to Pamela, and danced a few saucy steps of triumph down the room. A sudden cry from her companion stopped her, she turned to find Pamela

standing, rigid with astonishment, holding in her hand a small, silver-fringed glove.

Betty stared amazedly.

"Why, Pam, what's amiss? 'Tis a glove, that's sure!"

Then Pamela turned to her a face of dawning horror, and cried in a voice of utter indignation—

"But, Betty! Betty! It isn't mine!"

For a moment Lady Betty Acton's face was a picture of bewilderment, then her quick wit penetrated the mystery with a gasp of comprehension.

"Pamela!" she cried with conviction. "He was prepared for our coming, his man has betrayed us! He knew we were hid here." Then the full force of the situation dawning upon her, peal upon peal of laughter echoed through the room. "Oh!" she gasped, "was there ever such a man? Pamela, if you don't wed him and plague him for this, I'll never call you friend again."

But Pamela, crimson with fury, dashed the glove to the ground and hurried from the house.

When Miss Pamela Plunkett alighted from her coach to walk in the Park upon the following morning, her face was cold and pitiless, her heart set upon revenge.

She was resolved to punish those nine gallant beaux who had dared to stake their guineas upon her sex's favour; and she vowed, seeing they had forced her to be a goddess of discord to her own sex, to become so in good truth and spread disunion also among the ranks of the foe. But chiefly was she bent upon a merciless revenge on him who had so dared to mock her,—on that unspeakable Patrick Fytch. In vain did prudence whisper warning; like a true woman she shut her eyes to consequences and went boldly on her way.

First she disarmed her foes, drawing them about her by all the magic of fleeting glance and soft alluring smile, keeping them beside her by all the arts of practised wit and beauty. Then, when all were at her feet, she flung the apple.

Pausing abruptly in her walk, she waved her fan imperiously and summoned Mr Fytch to her side.

"Sir," she said, facing him defiantly, eye to eye,—“Sir, these gentlemen annoy me with their attentions, remove them.”

Like a thunderbolt her words struck the ears of the attentive gallants: amazement was writ large on every face.

“Madame——!” stammered Mr Fytch, even he astounded at her words.

“I bid you remove them—and chastise them for their impertinence,” answered the lady unmoved. “You should know how; you carry a sword.”

There was a moment's silence as amazement changed to anger, and lightning threats awoke in every eye.

Mr Fytch bowed low in submission,—so low that his twitching lips and laughing eyes were hidden from his lady's glance.

“Madame,” he cried, “is not my sword ever at your service? Shure, you shall no longer be annoyed.”

“I am vastly obliged,” answered Pamela coldly. She summoned her coach and drove away.

That evening the world was in a ferment, for it was freely rumoured that Mr Fytch had sent a challenge to each of the nine gallants, and the meetings were appointed for the following morning.

“What have you done, Pamela?” Lady Betty asked her indignantly. “The man is not a cat that he should have nine lives to risk at will. 'Twere not in reason he should escape at every meeting. Assuredly he will be killed.”

“Does he not richly deserve it?” answered Pamela coldly, and so saying she escaped homewards and lay the night through wide-eyed, musing on pistol-shots and gaping wounds.

But at dawn she could endure no more, her heart was melted. She arose, and waking her maid bade her send a servant post-haste to Lord Charles Acton's house bearing a note for Lady Betty. And in the note she entreated Lady Betty to urge her husband forthwith by any means to prevent the approaching duels, seeing her heart smote her on account of the danger she was bringing upon nine

innocent men, when it was but the tenth whom she desired to punish.

She eagerly awaited the messenger's return. But at the first words of Lady Betty Acton's reply her face blanched with fear, for thus it ran—

"Dear Pam, Charles sleeps the night with Mr Fytch, therefore I cannot come at him with your entreaty. But be at rest; the meetings are with swords, hence the advantage will lie undoubtedly with Mr Fytch's opponents, seeing he will presently become too exhausted to make good his defence and will assuredly receive the punishment you desire."

"'Tis well!" cried Pamela with quivering lip. "'Tis well! I am vastly delighted," and on a sudden she flung herself back on to her couch and burst into bitter sobs.

For she had not seen Lady Betty smile while she penned her hasty note, nor heard her hum a merry line concerning a woman's "Nay."

Three hours later when, exhausted with her weeping, Pamela sat listless under the hands of her tirewoman, there came to the door a messenger bearing a packet and a note. This was the burden of the note—

"Madame, your commands have been obeyed by him who is ever your adoring slave; but doubtless it will rejoice your pitiful heart to learn that no bloodshed has resulted. So deeply had the knowledge of your sovereign displeasure smitten the hearts of my opponents, it needed but that I should declare myself your chosen avenger (appointed by special mark of favour to be your champion) to draw all instant apologies. For who would dare to meet a sword gloried by your express favour and drawn at your command? I lay the trophies of its victories at your feet."

The packet contained nine sword-knots.

Pamela flung them from her and wept with rage. Yet even as the tears fell, her heart glowed with happiness, and her lips curved unwillingly into a smile.

Doubtless her pitiful heart rejoiced that none had perished!

And now—the consequences!

When next Miss Pamela Plunkett went abroad Mr Fytch advanced eagerly to greet her, and took his place by her side as one to whom the honour was due. And lo! it was clear all the world looked upon it as his right, for go where she might, do what she would, he was ever by tacit consent her appointed slave. Others might crowd to offer her light gallantries and seek to win her smiles, but place was ever yielded when he approached. Had she not given him the right to take upon him her quarrel? Should he not receive the due reward? So adjudged the world, and smiled to see her impotence.

And what could she do against such conspiracy?

In vain she met his advances with scorn and contempt; undaunted he smiled upon her peevishness. In vain she lashed him with all the bitterness of her angry tongue; he bore it undismayed, or—strange, unheard of audacity—bespewed her in his turn. In vain she sought to lavish her kindness upon others; he took all favours as his right till she grew dumb in wonder at his assurance.

And day by day he laid siege to her heart with all the arts of a determined wooer. Now he would overwhelm her with attentions, silencing her opposition by the very extravagance of his gallantry, forcing her smiles by the ingenuity of his compliments, and eyeing her the while with that whimsical smile that awoke all her defiance. Anon he would dismiss compliment and talk to her in plain words such as she seldom heard in that age of gallantry, of the world around them, of love and life, of men and manners, interesting her despite herself. And when she turned from him in scorn and would not listen to his words or smile at his jests, more desperately than ever did he besiege her heart by a look, more eloquent than words, which no disdain could silence.

How could she escape his homage save by ignominious flight, such as her soul despised? And, indeed, were it not for this wager, perhaps she would not greatly have desired to escape him. Who can say? But the thought of what was passed and what was to come hardened her heart with suspicion of his gallantry, for well she knew his

present devotion would but lend colour to his final triumph.

At times, when he was beside her, her suspicions would sleep, for never by word or glance did he hint of glove or wager. But anon, alone in her chamber, when she remembered the smiles of the women, the glances of the men, then her pride burned within her at thought that indeed in the world's eyes the wager would be won, and she pondered long hours how the glove might be reclaimed, raging the more against her tormentor since she felt her heart was traitor to herself.

So the days passed until came the last of the allotted time. The world was full of whisper and surmise. Two of the wagers were confessedly lost, others triumphantly won. Some—Lord Petre's among them—were subjects of discussion, some crying the favours were unfairly won, others—for the most part women—declaring all fair in love and war, and whispering that she who cannot guard her locks were little like to guard her heart. The matter of Pamela and Mr Fytch remained in doubt, none knowing clearly of any favour given, yet some asserting that Mr Fytch had won.

Throughout the day Pamela sat alone within doors, pondering how she might yet win back her glove and at the eleventh hour save her pride. As evening came she grew reckless and, scorning her duenna's dismayed remonstrance, she sent to bid Mr Fytch come to her, resolved to risk all on one last desperate stake.

He came promptly at her bidding, a smile of anticipation lurking in his eyes.

Pamela received him, beautiful and defiant, standing beside a table on which, beside the candles, was laid a pack of cards.

"In what can I serve you, madame?" he began; "my poor efforts are at your service."

"Mr Fytch," she began coldly, "you have in your possession a glove of mine which—I desire."

"Madame," he protested eagerly, "what entreaty of yours could I deny?"

But again Pamela checked his protestations.

"No, sir," she cried angrily, "I do not stoop to entreat. Moreover," she continued defiantly, "I will accept no favour at your hand." She hesitated a moment, then laid her hand upon the cards; "will you cut with me, sir, my glove to be the stake?"

He looked at her gravely and shook his head.

"Nay, madame, the stakes are too unequal. Should one play to lose all and win nothing?"

"You play to win my glove," she argued.

"A priceless treasure, madame, but — it is mine already!"

Pamela moved impatiently.

"What would you have, then?" she asked.

Sortly he answered her: "Madame, there is but one prize for which I would stake this treasure. Must I tell you what is that prize?"

Pamela was silent.

"What do you dream would equal for me the value of this glove?" he asked again.

Then she raised her head defiantly:

"One hundred guineas, the wager it will win you on the morrow."

He smiled, but shook his head and moved nearer to her side.

"Madame, can you indeed think so unworthily of me as to dream I would stake so sweet a gift in the light of a common wager?"

Pamela stared at him in amazement. "You would not——," she stammered.

"Never, madame; so mean a thought never entered my head."

"Then what would you with the glove?" she cried unguardedly.

"I would that it should lie ever next my heart, as it hath lain since that sweet day when first you gave it me. I ask no more."

Pamela stood silent, eyeing him doubtfully. Mr Fytch glanced at her face and continued with a sigh:

"But, madame, since it is your will to deprive me of this treasure, yet not your will to take it as a gift at my hands,

why then, I ask nothing better than to submit the matter to be adjudged by the Fates. They are women, and should have pity on my plight."

Pamela hesitated:

"You have not named the stakes."

He paused, and bent a questioning look upon her face. Then he began gravely:

"Madame, I will not play save to lose or to win all. Are you agreed?"

"Yes," she stammered doubtfully.

"Then these be the stakes. If I lose, the glove is yours, and I will spare you further importunities—I will leave you."

"Leave me?" cried Pamela dismayed, "leave me?"

"Have I not said I play to lose or win all?" he answered.

Pamela's lip quivered.

"And if you win——?" she asked.

"Ah, madame, if I win may I not claim what alone is dearer to me than the glove—that hand which gave it to me?"

Pamela stood silent. Doubt, pride, love, were striving in her heart.

"Why should you leave me?" she asked, "I do not—er—desire never to see you again."

"Nor I, madame, if I might see you always," he answered.

"There are other alternatives," she suggested.

"I will have none of them," he answered firmly; "I will have all or nothing."

"I cannot let you keep my glove," she mused; "but have you no other stake to propose?"

He shook his head. "Those are the terms, madame, on which I will risk my treasure. What say you?"

A moment longer she paused, then bowed her head—

"I am content."

"Shall we cut thrice, madame?"

"Thrice. And you to begin."

He cut a six, but Pamela a queen.

"Your sex befriends you, madame," he sighed.

Again they cut, and now hers was a two but his a seven. Fortune's wheel had turned.

And now time stood still for both until he cut again. The ten of spades turned upwards in his hand.

Then a strange thing befell. For a moment Pamela hesitated, then slowly she put out her hand and cut the cards. But even as she turned the cards upwards they fell from her hand and lay scattered on the floor.

There was a moment's pause, then with a guilty glance Pamela put out her hand and cut again, and lo! a five lay upwards on the table. Her stake was lost.

Pamela stood silent, with downcast eyes, waiting what should follow. But Mr Fyfe watched her eagerly, and a strange smile gleamed in his eyes. For even as she dropped the cards he had noted the gleam of a court card in her hand, he had seen her guilty glance, and he knew that in truth the victory had been hers had she so chosen.

On a sudden he formed his purpose, and the smile grew deeper in his eyes.

He pushed away the table and drew a step nearer her side. He looked at her and sighed.

"No, madame," he began softly, "you have lost indeed; but do not fear. For it is not possible that I should take advantage of that priceless victory the Fates have given me."

Pamela started. "Not possible!" she murmured vaguely. Then suddenly a flush of pride crimsoned her face. "Be assured, sir, 'twill not be forced upon you," she cried, raising her head haughtily.

But he laughed softly.

"You know well, madame," he said gently, "it was not that I meant. But it is nevertheless impossible for me to accept such a gift at the hands of Fate."

He paused, but she made no answer. So presently he continued sadly:

"Indeed, it was a foolish stake. For I knew well that winning it I could not hold you to your bargain. What can a victor hope from the vanquished save, at best, a sullen obedience, and that, madame, I would not risk a crown to win."

Pamela raised her head quickly.

"And what if you had lost, sir?"

"Ah, had I but lost? For then, though I lost all, yet had hope remained: for the due of the loser is pity, and pity is akin to love."

There was a silence. Then Pamela bent her head low over the cards, and she answered softly:

"I think, sir, I say I *think*, that when I cut my third time, my first cut was a king—so I think, sir, I say I *think*, that you have really lost."

"So I have lost!" He laughed, but checked it quickly and drew nearer to her side, till he could see the blushing cheeks glowing behind the curls.

"Madame," he whispered softly, "may I then claim your pity?"

But she raised her head suddenly and eyed him with grave reproach.

"Have you deserved it, sir?" she asked.

He returned her glance, all unabashed.

"Is it not a woman's privilege to forgive?" he asked; "should I have deprived you of that?"

"Certainly you have given me ample opportunity," she answered coldly.

"Am I then indeed unforgivable?" he asked again softly.

But Pamela was silent and turned away her head.

Mr Fytch watched her a moment, but Pamela did not move. Again his eyes twinkled. He gave a sigh of despair, and taking up his hat, turned to the door.

At that Pamela looked up quickly.

"What would you, sir?" she asked sharply.

He stopped and turned to her a face of despair.

"Alack! madame, what indeed should I do? You see before you the most miserable wretch alive. Not only have I lost you, whom I would die to win, but more, I am proved unworthy of your pity and barred from your forgiveness. What else remains?"

But Pamela answered with averted eyes.

"My glove, sir, which I command you to return to me."

He started at sound of her voice, and gravely scanned

her face. But what he read there caused his eyes to gleam with victory. Slowly he drew the glove from his breast and laid it on the table.

"It is there, madame," he said sadly; "now have I lost all indeed."

But Pamela raised her eyes, dark with tenderness, and with a quick adorable smile she laid her hands in his.

"No, not all," she whispered "for you have won your wager."

CHAPTER II.

THE ROMANCE OF THE PRETENDER.

(TELLING HOW AMONG VISCOUNT BOLINGBROKE'S TREASURES
CAME LADY MARGARET BEAUCHAMP'S ROSE.)

I.

CAPTAIN RICHARD DRUMMOND, in addition to his many talents, possessed that most inestimable gift of Silence.

In an age when every man was either a writer, a wit, a politician, or a rattle, such a gift was as remarkable as it was rare, and had gained for the Captain throughout the army the sobriquet of "Dumb Dick Drummond." His silence was neither the silence of the man who has nothing to say (such men are seldom silent) nor the silence of one so overburdened with thought that his imprisoned spirit seeks in vain for expression, but rather the calm, restrained silence of one who has discovered the silver of speech,—a much overrated metal, capable of purchasing little of value.

Such, then, being Drummond's well-known characteristic, great was the amazement of the assembled company, of the entire army in fact, when one evening at dinner at Douay, shortly after the arrival of the London courier bringing news of the dismissal of Sunderland and of the Government's opposition to the Duke of Marlborough's plan of campaign, Captain Drummond rose from his place at table and defiantly drank "Success to the Duke and confusion to his enemies!" Two officers joined Drummond in his toast, but as the evening was far gone it was much to be doubted

whether they had the slightest idea to what they were drinking, one toast more or less being a matter of little moment to them, so the wine be good. But with Drummond there could be no question. He announced the toast clearly and defiantly, drank it slowly—no heel-taps for him—and then calmly resumed his seat, and continued to peel his nuts as though no remarkable interruption had occurred.

Confusion indeed ensued! So many august folk were numbered among the Duke's enemies that such an insult flung in the face of the whole Tory Government—nay more, some said at her Majesty herself,—such an insult could not be overlooked. Captain Drummond was commanded to send in his papers, though permitted, at the Duke's request, to sell his commission.

The affair was freely discussed, every man endeavouring to advance some plausible explanation of the Captain's conduct. Was he drunk? Was he mad? Or was he neither, but rather a far-sighted and clever diplomatist? Many who still retained their faith in the Duke's ultimate triumph, believed the last, and pondered in their hearts whether, possibly, Drummond's apparently most inopportune breach of his rule of silence might not eventually prove the wisest act in his career. That the toast could possibly have been prompted solely by love for the Duke and hatred of his enemies no one—in that age of intrigue and trickery—for one moment supposed.

But whatever the reasons—good or bad—for his act, it was done irretrievably: Drummond was cashiered, and found himself at the age of thirty-five debarred from the one profession he could follow, and thrown on the world with little money, no influence, and no aims.

But unlike the majority of such acts of sacrifice this one proved not unproductive of gratitude. The Duchess of Marlborough heard of this incident, and within three weeks of his dismissal from the army Drummond was established as her private secretary, at a somewhat nominal salary, it is true (if her Grace had a fault it was not extravagance), but on an understanding that their fortunes should rise together.

They were a strangely assorted couple, the Duchess and

her secretary, yet they agreed well together, for Drummond possessed in extreme the one qualification necessary to smooth intercourse with her Grace—the power of silence. Yet, grateful though he was for her patronage, it was at best but a poor exchange to leave the excitement of war, the interest of leadership, the companionship of men, and spend his days listening to the bitter complaints of an **angry woman**. **This was no work for a soldier**, and he speedily sickened of the life, yet clung to his post since nothing else remained for him to do.

On a certain dull Sunday afternoon in July, Drummond paid his score at his London lodging, mounted his horse, and set out on his ride down to St Albans, whither the Duchess had lately retired to avoid alike the heat of town and the sight of the open triumph of her enemies. He was accompanied by his servant Joseph Baker, a loutish fellow, who, with the fidelity occasionally found among the very stupid, had taken French leave the day his master left the army, and followed the Captain to England. Drummond had been some four days in town, nominally to collect news for the entertainment of her Grace, really to watch the working of the many wild and fantastic plots in the Duke's favour which the Duchess had set on foot, and which were the cause of quite half the misfortunes that befell her illustrious spouse.

This change from the quiet dulness of the life at St Albans to the stir and bustle of London had acted strangely on Drummond's spirits. As he rode through the busy London streets and brooded upon the aimlessness of his existence, he was seized with a passionate desire for action, a yearning to stake all on some desperate throw, to aim a blow at the heart of the Tory party, re-establish the Duke and Duchess in the Royal favour, win his fortune or lose his life. He knew or guessed, as all the world knew or guessed, the existence of private correspondence and intrigue between the leaders of the Tory party and the Court at St Germain's, yet what proof could any man bring strong enough to rouse the suspicions of the rabid Protestant party in the country?—what proofs clear enough to excite the indignation of the Queen? Yet surely could such proofs

be produced, even Anne herself would withdraw her favour from the intriguers, and the Tory party would be split asunder on this rock of the succession. Ah! to know—to know, and have no proofs! It was maddening!

He was roused from his meditation by sounds of disturbance in one of the narrow alleys turning off the street through which he rode, by voices raised in fierce denunciation, and that low savage growl, the note of an angry crowd. He drew rein and turned to learn the cause of the riot.

In the centre of a surging mob of men stood a young girl, small and fair, her bearing marked by an air of grace and distinction. Though in simple undress, the richness of her attire, the elaborate arrangement of her hair, the jewels on her fingers, all bore witness to the fact that here was no city wench, but a lady of wealth and fashion,—the small black page who crouched behind her was a further evidence that she was a lady of quality. She faced her clamorous opponents with a quiet dignity, but her eyes were wide with astonishment, and both fear and anger showed in her glance.

"What do you want, good people?" she asked again and again. "Indeed I do not understand you. How have I angered you? Where is my chair?"

But her words were lost in the clamour of the crowd, who gathered still closer about her, hurling at her such cries as—"Scarlet Woman! Papist Traitor! Stuart Spy! Painted Abomination! Jade of Babylon!" &c., displaying a cheerful indifference as to the meaning, or want of meaning, of the terms of abuse.

The leader of the throng was an elderly man who stood by the girl's side, himself facing her opponents. Dark and sallow, with pale near-set eyes, narrow forehead, and stubborn chin, his appearance did not bear the impress of a leader of men. But the eloquence which flowed from his thin lips inflamed his followers, numbed their shrewd sense, and carried them whithersoever he willed.

"And I tell you, brethren," he urged, emphasising his remarks with fierce gesture, "this bejewelled Jezebel, this painted and powdered quean, is none other than a Stuart spy. There be many such over yonder at St James's. And

mark me, brethren, if you be not ever on the watch to crush the serpent at its birth, then you will once more see England fawning at the foot of the Stuart spawn. You and your sons shall toil to give gold to his mistresses, while he takes his pleasure of your daughters and wives. Again you shall see the Abomination of Desolation in your temples, you shall be pope-ridden, priest-driven. You shall call neither body nor soul your own. There shall be spies in your women's chambers, and the fires of Smithfield shall light you to your beds. And mark me! if this comes upon us, it will be due to her and to such as her. Traitors! bartering England for the embraces of their papist king! What! Do I not know? Has not her maid, my own daughter, told me of it? Look you here——"

As he spoke he seized a gold chain which hung round the girl's neck, and with a sharp pull jerked out a miniature from the folds of her bodice.

"Behold! here is proof positive," he cried again with extended arm. But he got no further, for deeming it time to interfere in a matter of which he understood nothing at all, Captain Drummond, followed by his servant, galloped down the street, scattering the crowd to right and left, and drew rein at the foot of the steps on which the girl stood.

"At your service, madame," he said with a stiff bow.

The girl greeted his appearance with a smile of relief. Then the puzzled expression returned to her face.

"I cannot understand what they would have, and I do not know where my servants can be," she explained briefly. "I gladly accept your help, sir." Having said this, with an air of gracious sovereignty she stepped back and calmly waited for this rescuer to free her from her difficulties.

Captain Drummond's interference, however, had a very different effect upon the crowd. They were ripe for mischief, and the appearance of men upon the scene gave them ample opportunity and excuse for action. With a low growl of anger they advanced menacingly towards the new-comers.

"Spies—Stuart spies!" they cried, waving sticks and shaking fists menacingly.

Drummond smiled scornfully at such an accusation

launched against so staunch an opponent of the Tory party as himself.

"Back, fools," he cried sharply, "back to your kennels, or it will be the worse for you."

Still the crowd advanced, urged on by the voice of their leader.

"Who sold the army?" he cried. "Who made the peace with France? Traitors—spies!"

The affair began to have an ugly look. The men were really angry, and Drummond had no weapon save his riding-whip. He laid about with it lustily, but the crowd dodged the blows and hustled the horsemen back against the steps.

"They're keeping us awake, sir," remarked Joseph with a grin.

Captain Drummond stooped to the girl.

"Could you seek shelter in the house, madame, while we scatter the vagabonds?" he asked.

She shook her head. "No; it is his house," she answered, pointing to the ringleader. "They would not open to me."

A stone struck Drummond's shoulder. He turned sharply. A shower of missiles, fortunately badly aimed, was directed towards them. His eyes flashed angrily.

"Retreat with honour, Joseph," he said shortly.

"With the—er—booty, sir?" asked the servant.

"Certainly. Take the boy."

Joseph stooped and whisked the terrified page to his saddle.

"Can you mount, madame?" asked Drummond, holding out his hand to the girl.

She threw him a doubtful glance. "Is it necessary?" she asked.

"It is wisdom, madame. Be quick," he added sharply, as another hail of stones rattled round them.

Without more delay the girl gave him her hand, placed her foot in the stirrup, and swung to the saddle before him.

"Stoop low and hold to me," he said sharply. She turned simply, put her arms round him, and crouched low against his breast.

"Charge!" cried the captain. The two wheeled their

horses and spurred them up the alley, striking out lustily with whip and boot. A short fierce struggle ensued, then they broke through the crowd and galloped out into the wide street beyond, whither the rioters dared not follow them.

About a hundred yards down the street, outside a small hostelry, stood a sedan-chair. The chairmen's staves leant against the wall near by, but the men were nowhere to be seen. The girl saw the colours on the staves, and called to Drummond to stop.

"It is my chair," she explained. "My servants must be here."

Drummond drew rein, the girl slipped lightly to the ground, and he alighted and led the way into the inn.

The host answered his summons quickly, and stared in amazement at his visitors. Then recalled by a word to the recollection of his duties, he ushered them into a small parlour, and hastened away to summon the chairmen from their potations at the bar and to fetch the best his house could offer for such distinguished guests.

Meanwhile the girl turned to Drummond with a smile.

"My thanks, sir," she said simply. "It was a monstrous gallant rescue," and then she blushed a little and laughed softly.

Drummond wondered whether he could safely embark upon a compliment and tell the lady what a pleasure the rescue had given him; but finding no words at command, he prudently consigned the compliment to oblivion and remained silent.

The girl eyed him curiously, evidently surprised at such a wasted opportunity.

"And even now, sir," she said, "I do not know in what way I have roused the anger of these good people. I came here this afternoon to visit my maid, who is sick. We—er—we have but few opportunities over at St James's yonder to show kindness. I told my servants to wait near by and to return in half an hour. I had been there about fifteen minutes when the girl's father came to hand me to my chair, seemingly eager for my departure. He brought me out into the street, where was no chair—only, it would

seem, a crowd of madmen. Such are the facts. The meaning of them I understand not at all, for I protest I am ignorant of harm. My good man," she continued, turning to the host, who at that moment entered with the wine, "can you explain why I have been so ill-treated by your neighbours?"

"It was doubtless a mistake, your ladyship," he stammered nervously. "Brother Andrew is at times over hasty."

"Then, pray, warn Brother Andrew, whoever he may be, that if he know no better how to treat a lady he will presently make acquaintance with the watch."

She spoke with an air of command and assurance that sat strangely on one so young and small. Drummond smiled at the contrast between her imperious manner and her helpless appearance.

The host, with many bows, advanced towards her with the wine. Suddenly he stopped, stared at her for a moment open-mouthed, then abruptly set down the wine and stood upright with an angry scowl on his face.

"Pay your reckoning and begone," he said shortly.

The girl stared in amazement at this sudden change, but Drummond stepped forward with angry eyes, and laid his hand on the man's shoulder.

"How now, fellow?" he said sternly. "Are you too gone mad? How dare you address the lady thus?"

The man cringed. "Folks has their opinions," he muttered sullenly. "And some folks' opinions are honest. I'm no traitor myself, but a loyal subject of the Queen, God bless her. No Popery, say I, and down with all Stuart spies."

"Keep your opinions till they are asked," cried Drummond, exasperated at the repetition of the last absurd accusation. "Outside with you, man, and see to it that the street be quiet and the lackeys in attendance when the lady shall be ready to depart. Out with you."

With an ugly glance at the girl, the man slunk out of the room, and Drummond turned to meet the puzzled face of his companion.

"What can it be?" she cried despairingly. "It seems

my face mislikes all these good people monstrously. But wherefore—wherefore——?” and she raised her face to the Captain, as though challenging him to read therein any cause for dislike.

For a moment Drummond gazed deep into her eyes; then he dropped his glance. But in an instant he too started and stared in amazement, not at her indeed, but at the medallion which hung at her bosom, the medallion which the leader of the rioters had jerked out from the folds of her dress.

It held a miniature set round with diamonds. There was no need to ask the original. Those heavy features, that long, dark, melancholy face, were too well known to be mistakeable, and were mistake possible, all doubt was banished by the inscription round the picture, “Jacobus III. Rex.”

As Drummond gazed at the miniature, a sudden fierce anger surged within his heart to think of that dark pictured face enshrined in so fair a bosom, for he knew much concerning this Prince Lackland, yet little good of his dealings with women.

“I think, madame,” he said coldly, “you would do well to hide that jewel; without doubt it is that which rouses the suspicions of these people. They are, as they say, loyal folk.”

The girl followed the direction of his glance, and a deep blush crimsoned her face. “Ah,” she murmured, “I did not know——” She tucked the picture hastily into the folds of her dress, and looked half-defiantly, half-shyly up at her companion.

“Are you sorry, sir, that you rescued a supporter of the Stuart cause?”

“I am only sorry, madame, that such white hands should dabble in the mud of politics,” he answered sternly.

The girl eyed him gravely.

“I am no politician,” she answered softly; “I only wait and pray for the return of my king.”

She spoke the words in a voice so full of tender reverence, that Drummond could only stare down at her in silence.

There was a moment's pause, then the girl rose to her feet.

"I fear I must trouble you to call my servants," she said. Drummond turned in silence to do her bidding.

The streets were empty and deserted when they left the inn. The four stalwart chairmen, shamefacedly conscious of their remissness, were ostentatiously assiduous with their attentions.

The girl leaned from her chair and beckoned Drummond to her side.

"Farewell, sir," she said softly. "Indeed you have my thanks."

"I will escort you home, madame."

She shook her head. "No, sir, I have already trespassed too long on your kindness."

The expected protestations did not follow, Drummond bowed silently and turned away, and as she leaned back in her chair she frowned, and then laughed softly at herself.

But Captain Drummond and Joseph rode behind the lady's chair until it entered a broad thoroughfare, then, seeing no further dangers threatened, they drew rein and turned to pursue their own journey. And only then did Drummond remember that he had never learned her name.

The evening was closing in as the two horsemen set off at a brisk pace on their road to the north, and the narrow, muddy streets, through which they now rode, looked dreary and depressing. Captain Drummond's musings speedily returned to their former melancholy strain. The recent adventure carried his thoughts back to the career he had sacrificed, and again the wild eager longing for action filled his heart.

Presently Joseph drew up to his side.

"Beg pardon, sir. Your mare has cast a shoe."

With an oath of irritation Drummond drew rein and considered what to do. Their recent adventure had delayed them, and it was now very clear they could never reach St Albans that night. Seeing a small hostelry at hand, Drummond decided to spend the night there, and, leaving the horses in Joseph's charge, he strode into the inn, and was presently cheering his soul with a plain but well-cooked supper.

The tavern had evidently little custom. Two men,

coachmen by the look of them, were enjoying a friendly bottle of wine at a table in the window, while the host hovered near them in the intervals of his duty, exchanging gossip, and waiting an invitation to taste his wine. A hungry apprentice, near by, eagerly devoured his supper of beans and bacon, and listened with well-marked appreciation to the landlord's jokes. The only other occupant of the room was seated at the end of the table opposite Drummond. He lay with his face buried in his arms outstretched across the table. A ragged blue cloak was huddled round his shoulders, and half covered his head. At first glance a man would have said he was either drunk or asleep, but the extreme rigidity of his attitude spoke rather of the stillness of despair than of repose. Drummond eyed this man with idle curiosity, but neither the stir of his entrance nor the proximity of his presence roused the silent figure.

Supper ended, Joseph retired to see again to the horses, while Drummond sought the most comfortable corner of the settle, and prepared to enjoy a last pipe before retiring to the somewhat unattractive quarters where he was condemned to pass the night. The coachmen and the apprentice had paid their reckonings and departed, the landlord had retired to his family party in the kitchen beyond. The house was still.

Drummond puffed slowly at his pipe, staring vaguely at the shadows thrown by the flickering lamp, and thinking idly over the events of the day. As he reflected upon the fierce anger of the mob, showing how easily the suspicions of the people might be inflamed against the Tory party, he was again seized with a fierce despair at the impotence of his position, at the misery of knowing indeed that Stuart intrigues existed, knowing indeed that proofs of the same would ruin his enemies—knowing this, yet having no proofs to show. And as he mused, slowly the vague outlines of a wild scheme developed from the cloudy mists of his brain, a scheme to entangle the Tory leaders, if it might be, in a bogus intrigue, and so obtain clear proof of their disloyalty. Surely such proof would not be without effect on men who could be roused to fury by the mere sight of a Stuart picture.

And then his thoughts wandered away to the contemplation of two faces,—the fair, innocent face of the girl he had rescued, and that dark-faced miniature below it.

A sound in the room startled him from his musings; he turned, and with a smothered exclamation he dropped his pipe and sprang to his feet. For there! within a few yards of him, illuminated out of the darkness by the dim rays of the lamp, was the dark face of the miniature, the original of the very picture round which his thoughts were centred.

There were the same dark, almond-shaped eyes, with the lazy droop of the eyelids, the same long nose and full-lipped mouth, the same sallow complexion and dark, lank hair; only, whereas the pictured face was healthy, full-blooded, bright-eyed, the face that gazed at Drummond out of the darkness was white, drawn, haggard, and slightly pitted with small-pox.

For a moment Drummond stood spell-bound with utter astonishment, then slowly the white face broke into a sudden cynical smile. The smile carried Drummond back with a sudden flash of memory to a day, wellnigh thirty years ago, when, as a boy, he had watched the king and Court feeding the swans on the river at Hampton, and had seen even such a smile break over the face of Charles at some sudden misadventure.

The resemblance was miraculous.

Drummond took a step forward; his hands shook with eagerness.

"My God!" he muttered hoarsely, "who are you?"

With a short laugh the man rose, flung aside his tattered cloak, and strolled round the table to the opposite side of the settle,

"Ah!" he said coolly, "so you have been to St Germain's."

Drummond followed him with his eyes. The man was tall and thin, a veritable scarecrow; his garments were soiled and tattered beyond all recognition of their original shape and texture, but he held himself with a certain unconscious dignity, and all his movements were full of ease and grace. And again, as Drummond gazed upon him, he was struck with the extraordinary resemblance between

this vagabond, haggard, thin, unkempt-bearded though he was, and the pictured face of the miniature of James Stuart.

"My God!" he muttered again, "where did you get your face?"

"From my Sacred and Illustrious Father," said the man, with a bitter laugh. "All he ever gave me was this pestilently ill-favoured face."

"Your father? Who was he?" asked Drummond sharply.

"Egad, sir! a coiner of base moneys—I should say, for he has stamped the King's likeness on many false sovereigns." He turned away with a laugh.

"And your mother——?"

The man flushed quickly.

"My mother, sir, was a martyr on earth; she is now a saint in heaven. She had a woman's rarest virtue—she loved. Enough—of my mother."

Wild thoughts, doubts, wonders, flashed through the Captain's brain.

"What is your name, man?" he asked sharply.

"I—am called Charles Lebrun."

Suddenly the man reeled, caught at the back of the settle, and sank in a heap on to the seat.

"I'd sell my soul for a supper," he muttered.

"Done!" cried Drummond quickly, and crossed to the door to summon the landlord.

Lebrun raised himself, and followed the Captain's movements curiously. "Egad!" he said, "I've always heard the devil was a gentleman; but you've a bad bargain, friend."

Drummond made no answer: he relapsed into a brown study, idly watching Lebrun as he devoured his meal, noting the grace and refinement of his every movement, noting the unconscious air of command and assurance with which he gave his orders to the landlord; noting these, and maturing that scheme, for the success of which (so it seemed to him) Lebrun had dropped from heaven.

Lebrun ate his meal and drank his wine in a leisurely fashion. Finally he rose, crossed to the settle, and held out his pipe to his companion.

"No supper is complete without tobacco," he said. "For my part I take the full value of my bargain."

Drummond handed him his pouch. "Have you a trade?" he asked briefly.

"Jack of many, master of none," was the cheerful answer. "I've been soldier, secretary, singer, player, poet, fiddler, dancer, teacher—what you will. I've fought with Swedish Charles in Russia, and with Villars in Flanders. I've taught the daughters of greasy German burghers to dance, to speak French and Italian, to read Latin and play the harp. I've played Romeo in Dublin, and a dozen characters in Paris. I've sung my way all over Italy; I've driven the mails from Paris to Toulon; I've been secretary to a marquis, and barber to a burgomaster; I've strung rhymes, and written dedications." He laughed softly, reflectively. "It has been a merry life, taking the good and the bad of it," he muttered, "till I came to this cursed country."

"What brought you here?"

Lebrun hesitated, but the wine and his companion's brevity had loosed a tongue which was ever communicative.

"I—I hadn't seen my mother for twenty years. She thought, dear saint, it was her duty to send me from her. But—she was dying, and she sent for me. I reached Cumnor—to see her grave." He was silent for a moment, then continued: "Then this pestilential small-pox seized me. Sapristi! I paid a man all I had in the world to put food and water within reach of my arm. But even so the devil passed me by; and here I am, a poor wretch, without a peseta to call his own, and without a friend in the country. I've sold my sword; I've sold my wits; and now, egad! I've sold my soul for a devilish good supper. Come, Signor Diavolo, what do you want with me?"

Drummond rose, and knocked the ashes out of his pipe.

"I want," he said slowly, "the loan of your head for three weeks."

Lebrun laughed. "Goddam!" he cried, "it's not without precedent in our family to part with our heads, but I

should like a guarantee that mine would be returned to me, intact, at the expiration of the time."

"And that," said Drummond gravely, "is just what I cannot guarantee. But there would be a recompense."

"A recompense is a monstrous poor substitute for a head," muttered Lebrun. "But a masterless man mustn't be particular."

"I want your services for three weeks," continued Drummond coolly; "if you bring me success I can promise you £100, and a post under the Duke of Marlborough. If we fail——" he shrugged his shoulders significantly.

"There'll be the devil to pay, eh!" laughed Lebrun. "Well, I can't go back on my bargain. Under Marlborough!" he continued, eyeing the Captain shrewdly; "I'm no politician, but as affairs are at present that may mean much—or nothing."

"And that, my friend, is the keynote of the whole affair. It will mean much—or nothing. Look you, Lebrun," he added sharply, "I must have you. There is no other man on earth can carry the affair through."

Lebrun stared at him in perplexity. "Egad! I've ever had an uncommonly good opinion of my talents——" he began slowly.

"Talents be damned," answered Captain Drummond scornfully; "it's your face I want."

Lebrun gave a low whistle of comprehension.

"So, you are there, are you?" he muttered. Then he burst into a hearty laugh. "I'd give much to see dear cousin Jamie's face when he hears of it."

"Well, what do you say?" asked Drummond impatiently.

"Say! Say! Why, what says Signor Cassius? 'There is a tide in the affairs of men——' Come, friend Diavolo, lead on to fortune."

II.

"You are a fool, man, a fool! Peace? Who wants peace?"

Certainly the Duchess of Marlborough did not, nor did

any one who saw her striding furiously up and down the garden paths, striking with her cane at the delicate roses, expect it. Peace was far banished when the Duchess opened her mouth in indignation.

"Would I say a syllable for myself?" she stormed, "would I utter one word of complaint? Though I have my wrongs, though I have been ousted by a creature whom I nourished in my bosom, a creature I dragged out of her rightful place in the kennel and set in the queen's house. That woman has nothing she does not owe to me. And now—now she flaunts it in my face, lives in my rooms, holds my posts, draws my moneys"—here the Duchess's voice cracked with rage, "my lawful moneys, and Anne—poor fool—can do nothing without her, is a tool in her hands. Ah! the cursed viper, the ingrate! Was there ever such a fiend? Yet, do I say a word? Do I complain of my own wrongs? No! But when I see all the world ranged against his Grace, and men who should lick his boots insult him, bully him, slander him, drive him from command, and shelter themselves behind that woman's petticoats, that woman whom I—bah! I wish I could spit in her face. My rooms! my moneys! Bah, the viper!"

The Earl of Godolphin, leaning wearily back on the garden bench, shifted his seat uneasily, and sighed.

"You have ever been for war, Duchess," he interposed softly, "as befits a soldier's wife. Yet when you come to be as I am, with one foot over the void, you will think with me that the consummation most devoutly to be wished is Peace."

The Duchess crossed quickly to his side.

"Tut! Godolphin," she cried sharply, but her voice quivered, "you think too much of the 'void.' You are weary, no more. A month's rest and you will be ready again for battle."

The Earl shook his head.

"I vow it is no more," urged the Duchess vehemently. "And look how they have treated you also! Their greatest statesman, the one hope for England, flung aside like a rotten apple—wearied, sick, martyred with the gout——!"

"Come, Sarah, Oxford can scarcely be held responsible for my gout," intervened Godolphin, smiling.

"Not responsible!" cried the Duchess. "Were you still in office would gout, would any plague, lay you by the heels? I know you too well, my friend, to believe you would ever die while in harness."

Godolphin laughed sadly. "You were ever a staunch friend, Sarah," he said gently, and took her hand.

For a moment her face softened; she returned the pressure of his hand, and they sat thus awhile in silence, reviewing the past.

But presently the woman's energy again roused her.

"Staunch! Ay, so I was—too staunch. Had I been less staunch to Anne, had I twisted and turned to suit this caprice and that, had I flattered and fawned, had I intrigued with Orange and betrayed to the Stuart, perchance I had not been flung aside like a worn-out farthingale, to make room for Mistress Masham. Mistress Masham, forsooth! whom I dragged out of the gutter. Intrigue, quotha! little the Queen—poor fool—dreams how her precious Abigail is smoothing her nest with the next in succession! Ah! if I could unmask her impudent face——" Angrily she started again on her impotent pacing of the garden path.

"Where is Drummond?" she began presently. "He should have returned yestere'en. What keeps him? He should bring news of——" she checked herself quickly. She hesitated to speak of her intrigues before Godolphin, fearing the cold discouragement of his common-sense.

Godolphin shook his head.

"He brings you too much news, Sarah," he urged gravely.

"And what else can a woman wish for, cooped up in the country, as flat as——"

She was interrupted by the sudden appearance of Drummond, hurrying across the lawn.

The Duchess turned angrily towards him.

"So you are here at last!" she began sharply. "Where have you tarried? Do you dream you can keep me here, waiting your leisure, while you——" She broke off abruptly

and stared at him. "What ails the man?" she muttered, for Drummond's face was eager and alert, his eyes bright with the strange glitter of suppressed excitement. The Duchess caught the infection of his eagerness.

"What news have you, man?" she cried.

Drummond hesitated, and glanced at Godolphin.

"None of importance for your Grace," he began slowly. "Mr St John has got a viscounty where he aimed at an earldom, and is as gratified as one might expect."

The Duchess chuckled. "I knew Oxford would play him false," she cried triumphantly. "Now he will go whining to St Germain's, to that fountain of honour there."

Drummond shrugged his shoulders.

"It is like enough," he said, "but for the next three weeks he purposes to turn his energies into a new channel, having wagered Lord Wildmore to win a favour from a certain Lady Margaret Beauchamp ere the month be out. The town talks of it."

"Peggy Beauchamp!" cried the Duchess scornfully. "He will have little difficulty. One glance across the Channel should serve. She is patched o' the wrong side, and her aunt is a rare politician. But you have not ridden from London to talk of Wildmore's fool wagers?" She broke out impatiently. "Your news, man?"

Again Drummond glanced doubtfully at Godolphin; the Duchess caught the look.

"Out with it here and now," she cried impatiently. "Why, man, when you came your face looked as though you had caught every Tory in England fast in your net!"

"What would your Grace give for such a net?" asked Drummond hesitatingly.

"I'd give all I possess!" cried the Duchess vindictively.

"Ah! I've made a better bargain than that for your Grace," answered Drummond, with a slow smile. "I've closed with him for one hundred pounds."

"Who is the man talking about?" cried the Duchess impatiently.

"He waits the honour of an introduction to your Grace," answered Drummond imperturbably. "May I bring him here?"

"Be quick," she cried.

Drummond recrossed the lawn and disappeared behind the box hedges. In two minutes he reappeared with Lebrun. Shaved, brushed, well-dressed, the adventurer presented a very different appearance from the wretched tatterdemalion whom Drummond had discovered at the inn. His likeness to the Chevalier was still more marked in prosperity. He crossed the lawn with that easy grace so characteristic of the man, and bowed with grave courtesy.

The Duchess stood rigid in the centre of the path, staring at him wide-eyed. There was a pause; then the Earl of Godolphin rose with difficulty from his seat and slowly uncovered his head.

Lebrun looked from one to the other with his quick smile.

"Ah! your Grace marks the likeness?" he said calmly.

"Who are you?" gasped the Duchess.

"I am called Charles Lebrun, madame, and am very much at your service."

"What do you mean to do?" she breathed eagerly.

"Play a little masquerade for the amusement of your Grace, and the confounding of her Majesty's enemies."

"You would play the Stuart? Where?"

"In London, madame."

The Duchess turned to Drummond.

"God save us! what are you doing?" she cried.

Drummond began his explanation in low rapid tones.

"The Stuart has many adherents in London. We think it possible that were he to appear here in person, such of his friends as are at present somewhat—er—cautious and secret in their loyalty—would show themselves more open and courageous in his support."

"Well!"

"I am at your service, madame," interposed Lebrun. "It is true I am but the shadow, but in this case the shadow will serve our purpose better than the substance."

"Purpose! what would you? An insurrection?"

"It would hardly be expedient to go to such lengths," said Drummond. "But—the Prince being in London—

what more natural than that he should grant interviews to such of his adherents as have the ear of the throne—*Mistress Masham*—and others. And in such interviews, what more natural than that they should give him some clear and convincing proof of their loyalty and devotion to his person? Does your Grace take our meaning?"

The Duchess drove her stick into the ground emphatically.

"*Drummond!*" she cried, "it is a net fit for a king!"

"Or for a Queen's Mistress of the Robes," murmured *Lebrun*.

The Duchess turned eagerly to *Godolphin*: "What do you say? What do you say now, my lord?"

Godolphin frowned. "It is a boy's plot! A fool's plot, *Sarah!*" he cried. "Does the young man dream he can pass for the Prince and hoodwink the world?"

Lebrun turned to the Earl with a slow smile.

"I perceive, my lord, you are still uncovered," he said courteously. "I beg you will wear your hat."

The Earl looked from *Lebrun* to the hat he still held in his hand; he sank helplessly on to his seat.

The Duchess clasped her hands.

"It will work, it will work," she cried. "You are not yet blind nor doating, *Godolphin!*"

"Moreover, his lordship is not a woman," continued *Lebrun*, "and we shall do well to begin with them."

"We believe the wiser plan," continued *Drummond* eagerly, "will be to seek lodging and protection from some lady, a staunch Tory—one who can be trusted to keep secret the—er—Prince's presence in her house, and who can procure him access to *Mrs Masham*, and others. What does your Grace think of this?"

"You would trust a woman?" asked the Duchess scornfully.

"In matters of sentiment, madame," answered *Lebrun* drily, "and with the false half of a secret I would always trust a woman."

"You have the Stuart tongue, it seems," said the Duchess.

Lebrun frowned. "I trust not, for your Grace's sake;

the Stuart tongue has ever proved as false as it has promised fair."

"What do you say to the plan?" interrupted Drummond.

The Duchess mused. "I take no risk," she said.

The two men looked at each other and smiled. "If we fail, your Grace, we are but two adventurers the less," said Drummond.

"Have your way, then. And, by Heaven! I believe it will work," added the Duchess excitedly. "Women are such fools! Who devised it?"

"Captain Drummond devised the details," answered Lebrun cheerfully. "But in common justice to myself I must say I supply the most important part."

"Yes, it will work," cried the Duchess again, "and on more than women. My Prince of Princes!" she cried, extending her hand to Lebrun.

"Your Grace's most devoted slave," he answered, bowing over her hand. "And what reward, madame?"

The Duchess frowned. "What did you say you had offered?" she asked, turning sharply on Drummond.

"One hundred pounds and a post under the Duke," answered the Captain, eyeing her shrewdly.

"And pray who gave you liberty to offer such an exorbitant reward?" stormed the Duchess. "The post under the Duke is reward sufficient. One hundred pounds! Heavens! Am I made of money?"

Lebrun bowed with a low sweep of his hat.

"I have the honour to wish your Grace a very good day," he said quietly, and turned to leave her.

The Duchess stared after him; then called him back.

"It is exorbitant," she muttered, when he had returned again.

"Surely one living sovereign is worth a hundred pictured ones—though it be counterfeit. But as you choose." Lebrun turned away again; but she held his arm.

"Mind," she said, "I take no risk."

"None, madame," he answered, smiling. "But in the event of my success I will receive one hundred pounds and the Duke's favour."

The Duchess hummed. "If you fail——?" she asked.

"In that case I shall hardly be in a position to trouble your Grace further, unless," he added, smiling, "you fear the reproachful apparition of a headless spectre."

Godolphin nodded approval. "The man will pass," he muttered.

Lebrun continued calmly: "Since it would be a pity to worry your Grace again with these details, it would be wiser to place the one hundred pounds, now, in the hands of—say Drummond, or someone else in whom your Grace reposes confidence,—to be returned in case of failure. These little details are so frequently forgotten in the excitement of success."

The Duchess eyed him angrily for a moment, then she laughed unwillingly. "And the Stuart impudence!" she muttered.

"Your Grace," said Lebrun, smiling, "I believe women to be endowed with every good quality, save one—a trustworthy memory."

Drummond stepped forward. "The details of the scheme?" he urged impatiently.

"You and I will talk them over presently," answered the Duchess. "We will not inform his Grace what is toward until you bring the affair to a conclusion. He will not care to be troubled with such matters. Meanwhile take this gentleman away and hide him; he must not be seen too soon. Come, Godolphin," she continued, turning to the Earl, who had followed the interview with eager interest, "have you no faith in us yet?"

Godolphin hesitated. "The man will pass," he said again, "and the scheme is fairly conceived. But I mistrust your success; there is too much of one element in the plot,—it will ruin all."

"From what do you expect ruin?" asked Lebrun eagerly.

"From women," answered the Earl, eyeing him shrewdly.

Lebrun started. As Godolphin walked away he followed him with a puzzled glance, and a frown darkened his eyes.

But now the Duchess was fairly adrift on the sea of intrigue, and, as usual, would brook neither warning nor delay.

"Ah, Heaven, how I have longed for this!" she cried. "We have them all in our hands. They shall give proofs. They shall sign papers—Masham, St John, Oxford—all. We will draw them tight, and then to the Queen and the Protestants with a netful of Papist fishes. And then—then—back to St James's again. I vow I had despaired of proving them tripping; but now I've the bait to catch them all, thank Heaven."

"Thank me," said Charles Lebrun.

III.

Lady Margaret Beauchamp drove home from Lady Betty Acton's house, her face dimpling with an elation she vainly strove to suppress. To be chosen among women by such a connoisseur and critic as Viscount Bolingbroke could not but appeal to any woman's pride; and, despite her politics, Lady Margaret had enjoyed enough of society life under the wing of her uncle—Sir Everard Fairfax, that sturdy Whig—to be fully sensible of the distinction the Viscount's choice had shed upon her.

To be sure, St John had a wife, and married men should not desire favours from other women; her husband would never do so, opined Lady Margaret, with a hopeful glance into the future. But then the poor man was notoriously wedded to a shrew, and though rumour whispered of his unkindness, she doubtless did much to deserve it; and anyhow, the man was charming, and there could be no harm in his having his sport and in her sharing in it,—sport it should be, she would certainly never grant him his favour. And in fine a married man has many advantages over a bachelor in such affairs: he is infinitely safer to trifle with, so Lady Margaret thought.

Her spirits fell, and her wonderment increased during the famous Three Days of Neglect. But she was shrewd enough to read the riddle; and though she scarcely relished her forlorn situation, nor this relegation to the sour company of her fellow-sufferers, still it caused her considerable amusement. The chosen of so distinguished a suitor felt

herself infinitely superior to her companions in the wager, and, as she mounted to her room on the fourth evening, amused anticipation still glowed in her happy glances, and she hummed a merry tune while the maid dressed her hair for the Countess of Croton's ball.

On the table before her mirror lay two bouquets, a dainty box of comfits, and half a dozen sealed and scented *billets-doux*—offerings from the numerous suitors who sought the favour of the wealthy beauty, the mistress of estates in Scotland and in France, mistress of handsome houses and many servants, mistress pre-eminently of her own heart.

Her aunt's maid, Anna, who attended her : the temporary absence of her own, regarded these offerings with a sour look. Anna would fain have played the part of duenna over this young lady—a duty her own mistress failed to perform.

Lady Margaret opened and read each tender note with a smile of frank amusement. "Adored Angel," "Chamber of my Heart," such and many other enamoured epithets screamed from the pages. She read them one by one, and tossed them carelessly aside. But when she opened the last, she started: her face grew white, then crimson; her brows puckered, her eyes widened with wonder. Anna, watching her face in the glass, frowned still more sourly, deeming that surely here at last was "The Man!" Again and again Margaret read the lines. Suddenly she knocked aside her maid's hands and sprang to her feet.

"I must go to my aunt," she cried hoarsely. "I must speak to her at once. Remain here."

"Mistress Cochrane will be at her devotions," began the maid; but Margaret brushed her aside and ran from the room, leaving the abigail transfixed with astonishment and devoured by curiosity.

Lady Margaret ran to her aunt's door. Without pausing to knock, without pausing to make her reverence, she rushed across the room and flung herself panting by the elder lady's side.

"Auntie!" she cried, "read—read! Can it be true?"

Miss Cochrane was an elderly, hard-featured Scots-woman. There was little personal resemblance betwixt her

and her beautiful niece; yet report said that in her day—that day so long past—Margaret Cochrane had owned her share of beauty and more than her share of wit. She had the square chin, the resolute mouth, of a practical, strong-willed woman; the narrow forehead and far-away glance of a fanatic and dreamer—and of these two opposite qualities her character was formed. She ordered her niece's household, she managed her niece's affairs with unfailing good sense and resolution, but in all else the dreamer triumphed. Of such are the dangerous women of the world—with brains to conceive the dreams, with wills to attempt their consummation, without the timidity that should withhold them from action, without the clear sense to judge the wisdom of the attempt.

All Miss Cochrane's dreams were centred round the exiled Stuart. She believed, she had taught her niece to believe, in the Divine Right of Kings, in the sanctity of the martyred Charles, in the infallibility of his legal successors. All her thoughts were at St Germain's, all her hopes were centred round the young Prince, all her dreams were of his return. For this she lived, prayed, intrigued, day and night. She had given half her goods—she was ready, if need be, to give her life—if she could by any means further the Stuart cause.

Despite the opposition of Sir Everard, her niece's guardian, Miss Cochrane had largely imbued the young girl with her own faith, and Margaret was as simple and loyal a devotee of the Stuart as any woman in England.

For the rest, Miss Cochrane was a gentle, elderly lady, with a bright, kindly manner to all; but in her eyes lurked ever a strange, sad look, as of one who for years has awaited a comer, and who still waits on, without hope, but with an eternal patience.

When her niece broke in upon her thus unceremoniously she was seated before a large, exquisitely framed portrait of the Chevalier; a copy of 'Eikon Basilike' lay open on her knee; a sheaf of letters and papers beside her betokened her recent occupation. She turned with a rebuke at Margaret's impetuous entrance, but at sight of the girl's strained and eager face the rebuke died on her lips.

"Margaret! Child! what is it?" she cried. "What news?"

"Oh! I don't know," gasped the girl. "Read, read!"

She pressed the scented paper into her aunt's hands. Miss Cochrane read and re-read the lines. Her hand shook like an aspen leaf; 'Eikon Basilike' slipped unheeded to the floor; suddenly she fell on her knees before the portrait and burst into tears.

"Lord!" she whispered, "Thou art good. At the hands of Thy servant let it be accomplished, then let me depart in peace; I shall sing my 'Nunc Dimittis.'"

"Auntie! Auntie!" urged Margaret tremulously, "do you believe it? Can it be true?"

Miss Cochrane rose from her knees and faced the girl.

"True, child!" she cried. "Why should you doubt it? Have we not prayed for this? Have we not lived for it? Ah! my child, we are indeed blessed among women. Blessed forever be the house that shall shelter our king!"

Margaret picked up the paper and again studied its contents:

"MADAM,—

After years of absence Mr Jarvis again purposes to visit his home. To one whom his family ever regards as his truest friend, he turns for welcome, he intrusts his heart. If Lady Margaret Beauchamp have a mind to fulfil her promises and to assist Mr Jarvis in the recovery of his estate, let her prepare to receive and house to-morrow Monsieur Lebrun, the agent of her property at Neutbeaulieu, and Mr Maeniel, Scotch factor for Mr Jarvis. If Lady Margaret is at liberty to do business with these gentlemen, and if she indeed welcomes the return of Mr Jarvis, let her to-night, at Lady Croton's rout, wear a wreath of white roses as token of her favour."

"Auntie, what if it prove a hoax!" asked the girl doubtfully.

"Nonsense, girl! Who in the three kingdoms would dare play such a hoax? And furthermore, why should they? Would any supporter of the king? And what

Whig would know the identity of Mr Jarvis?" For these Jacobite intriguers innocently believed that their ciphers, aliases, and countersigns were quite unknown to the opposite party—an innocence peculiar to all such gentle schemers whom the Government does not consider of sufficient importance to be interfered with.

"And what if it prove a hoax?" continued the elder lady. "What then?"

"Oh, madame! The ridicule!"

Miss Cochrane turned sternly on her niece.

"Margaret! do you fear ridicule in serving your king? Think, girl, if it be *not* a hoax."

The girl nodded. "You are right, Auntie, we must go forward. But it is so strange," she mused, "that he should come to us."

"Ah, child! men will trust themselves to women when they will trust no other."

"Shall you send for Bishop Atterbury?"

"No," answered Miss Cochrane jealously, "he intrusts himself to us, we will take no further step until we have his orders. Remember, Margaret," she continued sternly, "this matter concerns your king's life. I can trust you to be secret; I have taught you so much, hoping for this day. But now it is not enough to keep truth silent, you must, if need be, speak falsehood. Your tongue, your face, your very heart must play the part. Not for one moment must you forget; yet not for one moment must you show that you remember. But I can trust you, you come of a brave stock, and it is not the first time in the story of your house that the king's life has lain in the hands of a woman. Go now and dress. I will prepare the household for the reception of these gentlemen of business to-morrow."

So Lady Margaret Beauchamp wore her wreath of white roses at the Countess of Croton's ball, which fact was duly noted by a footman in the pay of Captain Drummond, who, supposing the Captain enamoured of the lady, stole one of the flowers she dropped in passing, and conveyed it secretly to the former's lodgings, much to his embarrassment. For Drummond deemed himself totally unacquainted with any Lady Margaret Beauchamp, and as yet he saw no value in

any woman's posies. Yet he kept the flower curiously, wondering what manner of woman the wearer might be.

The next evening Charles Lebrun and Captain Drummond took up their quarters in Lady Margaret Beauchamp's house, and these two loyal ladies were presented to their king.

The meeting was strange. Margaret showed little surprise at recognising in Drummond her rescuer of the previous Sunday; she supposed him to be one of the many secret agents of St Germain's who came and went so frequently in London. But Drummond, when he knew her, recoiled with a sudden horror that would surely have amazed her had she possessed eyes for any save Lebrun. From the Duchess of Marlborough's account he had expected a rabid politician, or an affected lady of fashion, adopting the Stuart devotion as a pretty pose. When he saw this innocent girl with her simple, honest loyalty, when he remembered the reverent tones in which she had spoken of her king, he was struck with a bitter remorse at the part he had chosen to play. And when he looked from her to Lebrun, and remembered the pictured face hidden in her bosom, again his heart leaped with a sudden jealousy. But he was not the man to let even a woman's fate turn him from the service of his chief; he put his remorse behind him, buried his distrust deep in his heart, and prepared to play his stake.

When the servants had left the room the ladies went on their knees before Lebrun. With graceful courtesy he kissed Miss Cochrane's hand, and then, raising the girl, drew her towards him to salute her, knowing full well how a Stuart would take advantage of a prince's privilege. But when he felt her fair cheek so near his lips, and saw the awe and devotion in her dark eyes, his conscience smote him; he checked himself, and stepping back bowed, and kissed her hand instead.

Miss Cochrane noted the incident and was glad; for though according to her creed the king could do no wrong, she could not quite blind herself to the Stuart characteristics, and remembering Margaret's beauty and youth, and the undoubted charm of the Prince, she had looked forward

with anxiety to their close companionship, and had resolved to keep a careful guard over the girl. But so prone was she to believe all good of the Stuarts, this simple action was sufficient to silence her doubts; from henceforth she trusted him unreservedly.

So Margaret was left to guard her own heart, and a sad business the poor child made of it. All her life she had been taught to adore the Prince; round his person she had woven her sweetest fancies—he was to her the embodiment of all courage, nobleness, and chivalry. What wonder, then, when she met the Prince (as she deemed) in person, when his every look and word bespoke him what she dreamed, when he was dependent on her for protection and repaid her with a homage so marked,—what wonder if loyalty turned to love, and the vows of devotion to the abstract princehood became vows of devotion to the living man? So it indeed befell. But she herself at first knew no change; only his greeting left her strangely disturbed, and all night long her heart wearied her with the question—"Why had he not kissed her? Why?"

IV.

"Madame, if I am to be your agent might I not occasionally claim the honour of your company for—er—discussion of your affairs?"

Lady Margaret blushed unwontedly, and drooped her eyes before her companion's eager glance.

"My aunt has the ordering of my affairs, Sire—er—Monsieur Lebrun," she answered demurely.

"A wise precaution, madame; Captain Drummond has taken upon himself the ordering of mine. Should not two such tyrant-ridden folk console one another in their idleness?"

"We are all eager to obey your commands, monsieur."

He grimaced. "Madame, for you we have no commands; we do but crave you, of your pity, to give us sometimes, o' mornings, a trifle of your company. The days are plaguey long, waiting till Drummond and your

good aunt have perfected their plans for our welfare ; if I may not occasionally pleasure in your company, egad ! I were as well off in the Tower."

"What poor entertainment I can offer, Sire, is ever at your service."

"Let me but behold you, dear lady ; I ask no greater joy. Moreover, it is for your slave to offer you entertainment, not to await it."

"Ah, no, Sire ! Has not the king a right to the best I can give ?"

Lebrun frowned and shrugged his shoulders.

"Madame, your king knows well how to value your loyalty at its worth. Yet for the nonce he would right gladly welcome a holiday, and if you would please me, madame, you would believe the king still at St Germain's, and think of me but as Charles Lebrun, the humblest of your slaves."

The girl flushed and frowned at her slip. "Certainly were it possible, it would be more prudent," she murmured.

"And let us above all things be prudent," he answered, gravely, yet gazing deep into her eyes with one of those strange looks of his that held the eyes and drew the soul into them, and answered it soul to soul.

"Now," he continued gaily, "now that we are rid once for all of the irksome presence of his Majesty, how shall we amuse ourselves these long bright morning hours, when the sunshine calls us out, and Prudence (pestilent jade !) holds us safe within ?"

"Would you play cards, sir ?" asked Margaret thoughtfully, recalling all she had heard of the favourite pastimes of the Prince.

He grimaced. "Cards ! with you ? How so, madame, when you would hold all the hearts ?"

"Shall I sing, sir ?"

"That were too much happiness ! but then you would be entertaining me, and anon that sly fellow, the Prince, would be between us again. No, madame, do you sit there in the sunshine, like a dear saint in glory, and I will sing to you."

She sat, as he bade her, with the glory of the sunshine

turning her hair into a halo of light, sat in silence to listen to his singing. It did not strike her as strange, this proud queen of hearts, that he should command and she should obey him; was he not the king? Yet she wondered a little that obedience should prove so sweet.

He crossed to the spinet, and turning it that he might face her he sang to her.

He sang first old cavalier songs, stirring ballads alive with loyalty and daring, and he smiled to see her breast heave and her eyes sparkle as she followed the well-known strains. Then he sang of life and joy and wanderings, merry French songs with the ripple of careless laughter, soft Italian airs breathing eternal restlessness, old ballads of sea and sail, the songs of the "Great Road," and he watched her eyes widen with wonder, and her lips smile. Lastly he sang of love and sacrifice, of passion and despair. He did not look at her then, for he knew she looked at him. He ended with a simple song of farewell, breathing pathos by its very hopelessness, and as the last notes died into silence he crossed to her side.

"Have I pleased you, madame?" he asked softly.

She was silent a minute, then shook her head.

"Why must love ever go sighing?" she asked. "Have you no songs of constancy rewarded?"

"Does true love ask reward, madame? And even so, how can such as I ever hope for love's reward?"

"Ah! true," she answered with a start. "I had forgotten. Kings may not love—as others."

Lebrun rose abruptly and crossed to the opposite window. "Plague take all kings!" he muttered to the street below.

Henceforward not a day passed but they spent many hours of it in company. In the afternoons and evenings Lady Margaret and her aunt went into the world as heretofore, to play their parts; Miss Cochrane to watch, to listen, to gather what news she might; Margaret to trifle and jest, to withstand the siege, to outface the keen eyes of Secretary St John. So they gave to the world its due. But the long sunny mornings, and at times one sweet evening hour they gave to their guests; and

Lebrun, having duly banished "the king," would sing to them, string verses for them, read to them at their work, and tell strange tales of adventures in camp or field, or sweet heart-stirring stories of the troubadours, in the days when men had died for love. Not often were he and Margaret alone together, but whether he talked or sang he did it all to her, and she sat in one bright blush of happiness, and marvelled that life should be so sweet. For both were adrift on the sea of love, and love knows no future.

And so their hearts spoke freely together, while Miss Cochrane watched and saw not, listened and heard not, with eyes blind and ears deaf to aught save the service of her king.

Captain Drummond, sitting day after day watching them, was neither blind nor deaf. Yet he would not believe that Lebrun could win this treasure, nor in any way disturb her peace; he taught himself to see in her devotion but loyalty to her king. So he blinded himself with visions, humbly fearing lest the voice of his heart cried prudence in mistake for jealousy. Only, as day by day he too felt more strongly the spell of her sweetness, he marvelled at Lebrun's gaiety, and doubted what the end might be. And at times he triumphed in his heart over his rival, and thought,

"I, at least, have held her in my arms."

But in the meantime the intrigue was not neglected.

Lebrun had an easy part to play. His hostesses were entirely unsuspecting; his resemblance to the Stuart had driven all doubts from their minds. From the first he had forbidden all ceremony in view of the necessity for concealment. The servants offered the greatest danger, but few of them were acquainted with the features of the Chevalier (Miss Cochrane had ever carefully hidden his picture), and intent on the multitudinous gossip of the town, they had little attention to bestow upon the persons of her ladyship's factors. While Anna, who might most easily have discovered what was afoot, was so busily engaged seeking afield for the unknown winner of her ladyship's heart, the writer, she believed, of the momentous *billet-doux*, that she forgot to watch at home.

Drummond came and went busily, and the ladies believed

him engaged in interviewing the many supporters of the cause. Lebrun accompanied him once or twice in the evening, but refused Miss Cochrane's offers to summon his friends to her house, asserting that too much coming and going of suspects might arouse the vigilance of their enemies. A tried friend of the Stuarts, and a strong personal friend of Lady Margaret, they could hardly have hoped to exclude Bishop Atterbury from the house, but, fortunately for the success of their plot, he was at that time in the country, so the Pretender was not subjected to his scrutinising glance.

Miss Cochrane would at times have wished to be taken more fully into her Sovereign's confidence, but she chid herself for the presumption of the wish, and bent all her thoughts on the one task allotted to her—namely, arranging with Mrs Masham for a private interview with the Prince.

The friendship between these two ladies was of many years' date. Despite the difference in birth and rank, despite the greater difference in politics, their affection for each other overcame all obstacles, and it was greatly owing to Miss Cochrane's influence that Abigail Hill had renounced the political tenets of her cousin and adopted ardently, though as yet secretly, the Stuart cause.

Though Drummond secretly aimed at higher game, the success of their enterprise in the eyes of the Duchess undoubtedly consisted in the trapping of her rival. The day appointed for the interview with Mrs Masham found Lebrun unaccountably nervous; but though he himself was unconscious of the fact, in reality his nervousness was due not to a fear of failure for the scheme, but to dread of exposure in the eyes of his hostess. For this reason he insisted on the interview being entirely private, and the ladies were obliged to acquiesce. At the last moment, however, he commanded Drummond to support him.

"Gad!" he cried mournfully, "I'm a poor Stuart to fear a woman, even if she be old and ugly. For the first time in my life, Drummond, I'd right willingly change places with cousin Jamie."

"Nonsense, man," answered Drummond unsympathetically, "remember Godolphin. You'll pass."

Lebrun chuckled. "'Sdeath! I caught the Earl finely. It is the very boldness of the game that defies suspicion."

And he proved right, for Mrs Masham was entirely unsuspecting. She met Lebrun with the deepest of curtsies, received his somewhat stiff greeting humbly enough, and answered his questions as to the welfare and disposition of his Royal sister with whole-hearted innocence.

"I assure your Highness, despite the unfavourable terms of the recent Peace, her Majesty is well disposed towards you. The clause demanding the expulsion of your Highness from the realms of France is but intended to lull the suspicions aroused in the minds of some of your enemies by the treaty with that country. The Whigs, unfortunately, have still much influence among the common people, but, I can assure your Highness, the greater number of those now holding office are your Highness's friends."

"We have already been assured of that fact, madame," answered Lebrun gravely. "Did we judge the prosperity of our cause by the number of wordy assurances we have received, we were already crowned. We would desire, however, something a little more substantial than words from those who would have us remember them as friends."

Mrs Masham winced. "Your Highness will find them ready with more than words when——"

"When we are crowned," interrupted Lebrun drily. "There is not a doubt of it, madame; but when the happy time arrives when we shall be enabled to reward services as they have deserved, the reward will be to those who have risked something for our person, hardly to those who have put us off with vague assurances until all risk is past."

Mrs Masham looked uncomfortable. Lebrun had recovered from his nervousness, and had thrown himself so thoroughly into his part that he had almost worked himself up into a real state of indignation against these cautious trimmers.

"When the first step is taken——," began Mrs Masham, again doubtfully, but he interrupted her harshly.

"And how, pray, is the first step to be taken if all our friends shelter themselves behind words until others have born the risk of the initiative? The promises are ever the

same! When your cause is ripe you will find us prepared! How can our cause ripen without more definite proof of support from those in power, to hearten the courage of such waverers as pause betwixt will and fear? Such promises are as worthless as the loyalty that prompts them."

"What more would your Highness require?" asked the discomfited lady, seeing her visions of continued prosperity under future sovereigns fade from her sight.

"We would require some proof of courage and confidence from those whom we shall rank as friends. Letters, duly signed and witnessed, setting forth in no vague terms the true loyalty of our supporters, and their readiness to assist us in any scheme we shall think fit to undertake for the advancement of our cause."

"But I can assure your Highness," urged the cautious lady, "your supporters will consider themselves equally bound by promises given to your Highness by word of mouth."

"It may be so, madame: but such papers are necessary to bring waverers to our side."

"I can assure your Highness," she ventured again to protest, "the reluctance felt by many to put pen to paper in an affair of such import, arises merely from—from the danger of such papers falling into improper hands, and so bringing ruin on your Highness's cause by destroying those who could best further it."

"We are well aware of it, madame, and it is for that reason we have ventured our person here in London. We well know the dangers of such papers falling, during transport, into the hands of spies; but we ourselves scarce expect to meet with such distrust as, perhaps naturally, is felt towards our agents. We are, therefore, here to give opportunity to such of our friends as have courage to bind themselves to our cause, to hand such papers to us in person that so they may rest assured of their safe keeping."

"Your Highness was ever thoughtful of your friends," murmured Mrs Masham, despondently.

"We have already met with many grateful proofs of their devotion," answered Lebrun. He was silent a moment, then continued with meaning: "We fear we are hardly likely to be able to grant you a second interview,

madame. If, however, you wish to give into our hand such substantial proofs of your loyalty, our secretary will give you now the opportunity to enscribe the same."

Mrs Masham stammered and hesitated. Such an idea as a doubt of the Prince's identity never crossed her mind; the house wherein she found him installed was proof to her of good faith. It was natural for so cunning a woman to dread committing herself so thoroughly to the Stuart cause, but it appeared to her impossible to disobey the Prince's commands, however discreetly veiled the commands might be.

Lebrun smiled at her discomfiture.

"We are aware, madame," he said gently, "that women are, by nature, lacking in courage, and loath to bind themselves to one course, and we were unwilling to put such a tried friend to the test. But at our accession rewards must fall to such of our friends as have given proofs of their desert, and it would grieve us were we obliged to leave such loyalty as yours unrewarded, because resolution had failed you at the moment of trial." He rose, and, crossing to the spinet, began idly to turn over the music. "We have never considered," he said casually, "that either your own or your husband's present services to our sister are valued at their just worth. A peerage should, at least, be supplemented by a suitable grant to support the title."

The Queen's favourite could hesitate no longer. By predilection she was a supporter of the Stuarts, and though, outwardly, their cause seemed on the wane, none knew better than she how many influential men were secretly working against the Hanoverian succession. In those days none knew positively how far their neighbours were committed; the Prince's visit in person to London, his allusions to the loyalty he had already encountered, his undoubting references to his succession, led her to suppose that he had already won similar proofs of loyalty from many unexpected sources. She yielded, and seated herself at the table upon which Drummond had prepared writing materials.

Lebrun softly fingered the notes of the spinet.

"A few lines will suffice, madame," whispered Drummond, leaning over the lady. "His Highness but desires your assurance that you recognise him as rightful heir to the throne of England, and that you bind yourself to give him your full support and assistance in any undertaking he may set on foot for the furtherance of his cause."

A few lines indeed, yet rightly interpreted they spelt high treason! Mrs Masham again hesitated.

"Should they fall into other hands——" she began doubtfully.

Drummond laughed impatiently. "If you cannot trust his Highness's honour," he said scornfully, "is it not, at least, to his interest to preserve the safety of his friends?"

Mrs Masham slowly dipped her pen in the ink.

"Courage, madame," urged Drummond. "Why, when all is done, you have but declared her Majesty's brother her lawful heir. Should she consider that a treason to her person?"

The lady took courage at this view of the case. Slowly the words were written at Drummond's dictation, and she turned to hand over to Lebrun the paper that spelt her ruin.

He took it with his quick, quizzical smile.

"Is the test so very terrible, madame?" he asked gaily. "But indeed we value your loyalty at its worth. You have a prince's word that your Sovereign will know well how to reward it."

After which equivocal words he was about to dismiss her, when Drummond stooped and whispered in his ear. Lebrun paused and frowned.

"You are right, Drummond," he answered gravely. "Mrs Masham, we will give you present token of our favour in a warning to a friend. All the world knows of the friendship existing betwixt you, madame, and the present Lord Treasurer, the Earl of Oxford. We have formerly received many assurances of goodwill from the Earl, but of late we have seen grave cause to distrust his loyalty. For that reason we do not see fit to acquaint

him with our presence here in London. Nor have we learnt much here to alter our opinion of his honesty. But could you, madame, by your influence, induce him to send to us by your hand such a proof of good intentions as you on your part have just given us, we would forget what is passed, and again repose in him the confidence we would fain extend to all our well-wishers."

It was a grave risk, thus openly seeking the lady's help towards the entrapping of Oxford. Even as he spoke, with his air of dignified severity, Lebrun laughed at the woman for being so easily befooled. But a woman who has just gravely committed herself to treason is not clear-witted to mark a trap; her chief desire ever, from Eve downwards, is for company in her crime. Had she not believed beforehand that Oxford was involved, even Lebrun's diplomacy would scarce have induced her to sign away her safety: finding herself now alone in danger, she resolved to lose no time in persuading her ally, Harley, to join her company, particularly as she saw hope thereby of further preferment. She lent herself willingly as bait for the fish.

"Such small influence as I possess, Sire, shall ever be exerted on your Highness's behalf," she promised. "And I have very little doubt my Lord Oxford will be ready to satisfy your Highness."

"It is not our pleasure to receive my Lord Oxford, nor that he should know of our presence here in London," said Lebrun, curtly; "not, at least, until we have good proof of his loyalty. He will entrust to you whatever word he may have for us. But I warn you we will only be satisfied with the clearest assurances, in writing, of his devotion to ourself and our cause."

This severity duly impressed the lady.

"I will hope to bring your Highness such assurance in a few days' time," she said. "In the meantime, God keep your Highness."

"Exit Abigail, re-enter Sarah!" cried Lebrun, gaily, when the favourite had taken her departure. "That woman has doomed herself. Parbleu! I'm not sorry for her, Drummond: if a woman must be political she

should at least hold fast to her party. Faugh! how she squirmed! I thought we should never land her."

"The money did it," answered Drummond, calmly. "It's the earldom itself will catch St John."

"Bolingbroke!" cried Lebrun, sharply. "Peste! Drummond, that's too plaguey dangerous; the Secretary is no fool."

"But can be made one," answered Drummond, drily. "An earldom dangled before a disappointed man is a famous blind."

"Diable! It makes my head feel unsteady on my neck. He's of the Party, I suppose?"

"The staunchest supporter your Highness possesses in the Cabinet," answered Drummond, mockingly. "Moreover, we have an ally in our attack; Lady Margaret has already begun to work on him."

"Lady Margaret!" cried Lebrun, sharply. "What should she in this business?"

"She will have free opportunity to convert him. He has wagered to win her favour in the next three weeks, or lose one hundred pounds."

"The devil he has!" muttered Lebrun, jealously. He stood silent a moment, then broke out eagerly: "Sapristi! he's worth playing for, Drummond; we'll catch him and lay him by the heels. We will give him something else to think of than ladies' favours. Yes, you are right, we must have him. Only," he added, turning away, "keep Lady Margaret out of the affair; she is too young to be political. Miss Cochrane is another guess thing; we can use her well; but—but not that child."

Drummond looked shrewdly at his companion and opened his lips to speak a word of warning. But he was a man of silence, and to such neither warning nor advice come easily; he turned away and left the words unsaid.

Meanwhile other intrigues were afoot in that surging whirlpool of London. Lady Margaret's maid, Susan Willis, had returned to her place some few days after her mistress's visit to her house. Her genuine distress at the treatment Lady Margaret had received on that occasion at the hands

of her father had softened that lady's anger, and induced her to take back the girl to her service,—the more readily perhaps since Susan was a quiet, handy girl, who worked well and spoke little, unlike the majority of her class.

Susan's father was a shoemaker. If Shakespeare speak true, since the days of Julius Cæsar shoemakers have ever been rare politicians. Andrew Willis was no exception. It might be said with truth that he was but incidentally a shoemaker, though he worked fitfully at his trade: all his thoughts and energies were devoted to the propagation of his creed, that strange mixture of religion and politics which so often forms the basis of rapid fanaticism. He was a noted preacher among his class, a leader of one of the innumerable small sects which had of late years sprung into being, whose chief tenets were dread of Popery and hatred of the House of Stuart.

He had many followers, and owed his power among them chiefly to the influence of his eloquence. In the High Church riots, four years previously, his chapel had been destroyed to the tune of "When the king shall enjoy his own again!"—therefore some personal rancour was added to enflame his hatred of the exiled Stuarts, a hatred which amounted with him to mania. He had been one of the chief leaders in the riots against Dr Sacheverell; he believed London to be teeming with Popish spies, and was ever on the watch for some Tory plot to upset the Queen and restore to the throne the great supporter of the Roman Church.

Susan Willis had been brought up in the faith of her father, and it was primarily that she might aid him in his watch upon the friends of the exiled Stuarts that he had sent her to take service under Lady Margaret Beauchamp. The girl was sharp, a soft-footed, quick-eared wench, with an eye at every key-hole; her mistress, believing in the genuineness of her professed affection, kept no watch upon her, and few things passed in the house about which Miss Susan Willis could not have given a very circumstantial account.

Thus it befell that while Lebrun was entrapping Mrs Masham, and Lady Margaret was testing the political bias

of St John, Susan Willis, having obtained leave of absence, was speeding towards her father's house big with news.

She found Willis seated in a dark corner of his shop, a half-stitched boot in one hand, a Bible in the other, muttering over to himself the points of his evening discourse. His daughter broke the thread of his communings abruptly.

"Father!" she cried, eagerly, "I have news."

He looked up, instantly alert.

"News, quotha! Tidings from that house of iniquity! What fresh plot are those Satan's jades weaving against the Lord? Out with it, girl."

But Susan frowned, and sat down deliberately before the old man.

"Father, before I tell you a word of it, you will swear here on the Bible, and by my mother's grave, that you will never again molest my mistress, nor any who are under her protection."

Willis scowled angrily at the girl.

"What, daughter! Are you become one of them? Have you been caught in the webs of the false enchantress?"

"Nonsense!" she answered, sharply. "Her ladyship has been very good to me; when I was ill she came and sat by me and talked so kindly. What other lady in London, think you, would do as much for her maid? And how did you return that kindness? For shame, father! You must give me your oath henceforth to leave her in peace, or I will go back and leave my news untold."

"And a great loss that would be, I doubt not," he answered, scornfully.

The girl stooped nearer to the old man.

"That which I have to tell will lead you to that which you desire more than life itself," she said, solemnly.

The man started. "What is it, Susan?" he cried.

"Give me your oath you will leave my mistress and her house unmolested," she persisted.

"Well, have your way," he muttered, sulkily.

"Swear it to me," urged the girl.

Reluctantly Willis gave the desired oath. Susan stooped and whispered in his ear—

"He whom they call James Stuart is in London."

The man leapt to his feet.

"What sayest thou? Art sure of it, girl?"

Susan nodded. "I have seen him, more—I have spoken with him. He is lodged at her ladyship's house, and is known as the French agent, Monsieur Lebrun."

The old man shook his clenched fists in the air.

"I knew it! I knew it!" he cried. "Could I ever dream the Papists would rest till they had him on the throne? Underground they work, like moles in the dark, till they have blinded our eyes and weakened our watch by their submission, and they hope to take us unawares. But shall they succeed? There are a thousand, a hundred thousand, who will prevent it. I will go summon the friends, we will surround the house; we will drag him forth——"

"Remember your oath!" interrupted the girl, sharply.

Willis dropped his hands to his side and turned to her helplessly.

"My oath, girl?" he said.

"You have sworn to leave my lady's house unmolested," she said, firmly.

"But the man must not escape us, Susan," he urged.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Small fear o' that," she said. "But I will not have her ladyship distressed. While he is her guest you will leave him at peace, else will I warn him. Time enough when he leaves her to do your will on him. You can catch him easily 'twixt here and the Channel."

"But what if the blow be struck while he is with her?" urged Willis.

"No fear of that," answered the girl lightly. "He does little all day save sport with her ladyship."

Pleas and oburgations were vain, the girl held to her word, and Willis was forced to submit, contenting himself with inwardly registering a resolve to have the house watched day and night, and to hold his followers ever ready for action.

Lebrun was in wild spirits that evening. In the reaction

after the anxieties of the forenoon, in the triumph of his success, Drummond feared lest he should lose his customary caution, and by a sudden slip destroy all they had gained. But Lebrun's part was second nature to him; whether he was talkative, jesting, or gallant he was ever the Stuart. Every word, every movement, was true to the character; not indeed (had they known it) recalling the boisterous mirth or half-sulky melancholy of the Chevalier, but rather the ready wit, the reckless gaiety of him whom the world has dubbed "The Merry Monarch of England."

And his wit never failed him. Once he spoke of his visit to Constantinople, and Miss Cochrane turned to him in amazement.

"You must know, madame," he continued, openly laughing at her surprise, "Monsieur Lebrun is a mighty traveller; there are few towns in Europe he has not visited, and even such places as he has not seen he pretends to know well, lest others should see more than he. Ah! he is a great romancer, *ce brave Lebrun!*"

He laughed merrily, and Miss Cochrane sat in bewildered silence, wondering whether the Prince had perchance taken too much wine with his supper. She had heard he was addicted to such youthful weaknesses, but had hitherto seen no signs of it.

Lebrun handed Margaret to the spinet, and hung over her while she played.

"Madame," he whispered, "will you take pity on a poor man who has not breathed the morning air these seven—er—days?"

"What is your wish, Sire?" she asked, and her fingers trembled on the keys.

"Ride with me to-morrow out on to the heath at sunrise. I would willingly see more of this country of mine than my evening ventures show me. And I would see it with you beside me to teach me its beauties."

"Ah! but, Sire—the risk——" she stammered.

"Gad! madame, who at that early hour would note a lady and her groom? We shall be home again ere the day begins for these sleepy city folk. You will bear me company?"

Still she hesitated, fingering the keys.

"Come, Phyllis, come a-maying," he pleaded, gaily; then added half gravely, half playfully, "It is our—command, madame."

"At what hour shall we start, Sire?" she asked, yielding as ever to his will.

"We will steal a march on the sun, madame, and break our bounds at three o' the clock."

"Only let your Highness be prudent," she breathed.

Three o'clock on a July morning—heaven on earth! They rode slowly through the silent streets, on to the freedom of the heath. All the way Lebrun sang, chatted, and laughed; the fresh air of the morning was like wine in his veins; he was Boy incarnate.

When they reached the heath he lifted Margaret from her saddle, and tethering the horses near to graze, they sat down to rest. She crouched on a golden pillow of broom, and he lay at her feet. Long shadows crept over the heath and shafts of light chased them. She watched the climbing towers of silver cloud, scaled by the larks to hymn heaven's gate, and her heart rose to heaven with their song. But he had eyes and thoughts for none but her.

An ill-looking tramp slouched past the . and disappeared over a neighbouring rise. Margaret's thoughts came downward to earth.

"When you are king, Sire," she said, "I would pray you command this heath be preserved ever as it is now; let none build upon it save the larks."

He looked up and smiled. "Then were I the first to trespass," he answered softly, "for I should build a temple on this spot in memory of one sweet hour of heaven."

She sat gazing before her.

"When you are king!" she mused. "Do you often think, Sire, of what you will do when you are king?"

"Egad, madame!" he answered with a light laugh. "A wise king in these days will employ his head for the safe balancing thereon of his crown—not waste his energies in thought."

"Yet I think, Sire, when your Highness is crowned you will be ruler as well as king."

His eyes flashed. "That would I, madame," he answered eagerly. "No puppet-kings for me. I would rule while I reigned, or, like my grandfather, die in the attempt."

"Heaven forbid," she murmured piously. "And I think," she continued softly, "your subjects will love their king."

"Madame," he whispered, "were I the king there is but one whose love I would crave, and hers I might not hope to win."

She made no answer, and he, noting her confusion, continued lightly:

"Loved or hated, there will be mighty giving and asking of favours when James III. is crowned. And you, madame, what will you ask of the sovereign whom you have helped to throne?"

She flushed crimson, but her eyes looked bravely into his as she made answer.

"I would have, Sire, but this one boon. That the king, when he sits upon his throne, will think on the woman who has helped him to mount thereon, and will have pity upon all women—for her sake."

She turned away her eyes, a glorious fire of blushes. Stooping, he raised the hem of her skirt and kissed it.

"Dear saint!" he whispered. "Earth does not hold a man who is worthy of your thoughts."

Again they sat in silence.

Soon he continued musingly, looking at her the while:

"To me, madame, you seem like a little white rose. Pure white to the core, with just such sweet blushing outer petals as prove there is a heart hidden somewhere beneath that virgin white. A rose, sweet-scented, bidding a man think upon his days of innocence. 'Tis such a rose the bees and butterflies adore. The red rose flames in the noontide, but the white rose gleams through the darkness: it is to her the nightingales sing. A tender white rose! Such an one, I remember, grew by the door of my mother's cottage," he added, dreamily.

"Your mother's cottage, Sire?" cried Margaret in amaze. He started from his reverie.

"Assuredly!" he answered lightly. "Had not Monsieur Lebrun a mother, and did she not live in a cottage? I could swear she did. And under her windows grew a rose. All through the dawning the little rose bloomed white as driven snow. But when the sun, the king of the roses, came, she opened wide to greet him, and at his touch her petals blushed sweet crimson, to prove she had a heart."

His voice grew low and soft as he finished his allegory and watched the blushes crimsoning her cheek. He leaned towards her.

"The white rose for the Stuarts!" he whispered, softly.

A stone flung with force fell between them! A second followed and struck his arm. He sprang to his feet and turned angrily to face the interlopers. Beyond the tethered horses, at equal distance from them, stood two rough-looking tramps, armed with stones. Lebrun was astonished at the attack; it seemed so absurd, so unprovoked, he could not understand it. He was wildly angry, but hesitated what to do, having no weapon, and being unwilling to risk danger to the girl by engaging in a brawl in which he might not come off the victor. He shouted to know what they wanted, and walked angrily towards them, holding up his arm to ward off the missiles.

A smothered cry from his companion startled him; a stone had struck her shoulder. All thoughts of prudence now left him; shouting to her to seek cover behind the horses, he ran at the men, panting to get at close quarters and punish them. They stood his coming doubtfully. He rushed on them, steadied himself, and settled down to the quick "one-two" of attack. His blood warmed to the fight. His illness, the sedentary life he had lived recently in London, told against him; his fists were bruised, and his breath came quickly. But science will tell against many odds. His opponents were louts at the game; moreover, they had not expected such resistance. They stood up to him for five minutes, then one fell and deemed it safer to lie still; the other broke away and ran across the heath.

Lebrun laughed proudly at his victory, daintily wiped

his hands on his lace handkerchief, and shrugged his shoulders at the rent in his coat. Then he turned to Margaret.

"We have routed the army, madame," he cried gaily; then seeing her white and trembling, leaning against her horse, he hurried anxiously to her side.

"Ah! you were struck! You are hurt! Madame! Margaret! What is it?"

"Nothing!" she sobbed. "But ah! Sire, that you should thus risk your safety—for me!" She whispered the last words softly, scarcely knowing she had spoken them.

"My safety, madame! My life, my all, willingly, in your service."

She turned away and began fumbling for the stirrup; he saw that her eyes were blinded with tears. Without a word he took her in his arms and lifted her to the saddle; then, mounting quickly, set a brisk pace towards home. They spoke but little; he was pondering on the meaning of her tears, and she was fighting the tumult in her heart at the first sweet knowledge of her love. For beneath the polish, the artificial restraints of society, most women are at heart but little removed from the primitive instincts of the sex; but little changed from the days when men took by force and held by force that which they wished to have. Let such a woman but see a man fight for her protection, fight and conquer, from henceforth he will hold her heart in the hollow of his hand.

When the figures of the riders had disappeared in the distance, Andrew Willis crept from under the shadow of the furze bushes and shook his fist savagely in the direction they had taken. Then he strode over to the prostrate man and poured forth at him a volley of fierce abuse for his failure. But the tramp answered him with an oath, and rising, pushed the preacher aside and strode off silently towards London.

Now, as the days passed on, Lebrun grew more and more reckless, openly wooing Margaret with glances, words, and deeds. Nightly he laid upon her table verses dedicated to

her, he sang to her, talked with her, waited on her desires. He hoped nothing, expected nothing, he only knew that he loved her utterly, and he lived in the joy of the moment, recking nothing of what should come. And she accepted all he had to give, and gave all he asked, in a strange sweet submission. But day by day she grew more silent, more dreamy, and in her eyes deepened that look of half-fearful expectancy seen in the eyes of those who have but a few more days of life.

To all this Miss Cochrane was blind, for she too grew daily to love Lebrun, to rejoice in his gaiety, to pleasure in his gracious courtesy; and to some love brings blindness.

But to others love gives sight. Captain Drummond noted the danger, and though it was a struggle with his habitual silence, twice he essayed a warning.

He came one day upon Margaret, standing among a perfect garden of roses, which she was arranging with tender care. She turned to him a face glowing with happiness.

"Look," she cried gladly, "His Maje—Monsieur Lebrun himself has been out to purchase these for me from Covent Garden early this morning. Sure he should not be so imprudent."

Drummond frowned. "Monsieur Lebrun is indeed too imprudent," he said gravely, "And you, madame—do not you also risk—too much?"

She looked up quickly, catching the meaning behind the simple words. But she answered evasively—

"Would we not all willingly risk life itself, if need be—for his Majesty?"

Drummond picked up a rose and began absently plucking off the petals.

"It was of no risk to your life I spoke, madame. That, I trust, is in no danger. But I feared you might—er—in your pity, risk more for the Prince."

He stammered and flushed, but she turned to him a calm quiet glance.

"Captain Drummond," she said, "God has made men strong to protect a woman's life, maybe; but He has made women strong enough to protect their own honour."

"Madame, you wrong me," he cried quickly. "I feared neither for your honour nor your fame; I only dread danger to your happiness."

"Happiness!" she said with a little smile. "I wonder, sir, how much a man knows of that which comprises a woman's happiness."

And he said no more.

But to Lebrun he likewise essayed a warning one day when they were awaiting the ladies' return from a water-party. Bluntly he began, interrupting Lebrun as he sang gaily a verse from Ben Jonson's glorious song: "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may!"

"Your poet then took no thought for the rosebuds?"

The singer laughed scornfully.

"Egad! Why should he? Some buds bloom but that they may be gathered."

"And others bloom so high they cannot be gathered unless a man first break down their branch," muttered Drummond.

Lebrun looked at him moodily. "What harm, then, if a man kneel at their feet to worship their sweetness? Does he injure the rose?"

"Heaven keep her——" murmured Drummond. "You don't think——?"

"Think!" cried Lebrun, impatiently, "not I! I sold my head to you, San Diavolo, three weeks ago,—how should I do any thinking? I have but a heart left, and that, monsieur, is my own affair. What if I choose to spend it to-day in worshipping a rose? What is that to you?"

"And to-morrow——?"

"To-morrow! San Bacco! I may be hanged to-morrow."

Which appeared so exceedingly probable that Drummond was silenced.

VI.

St John, Viscount Bolingbroke, felt himself sadly ill-used by fortune, by men, and still more to his astonishment, by women. Fortune, who with any consideration

for his ability should at least have raised him to the head of the Ministry, still left him stranded as Secretary, tyrannised over by Oxford and obliged to be discontented with a beggarly viscounty instead of the earldom he coveted. Men, while acknowledging his ability, showed themselves daily more suspicious of his good faith, and attacked him bitterly in verses and lampoons, and now it would seem that even women, the creatures he had deemed so undoubtedly his adorers, were growing slack in their allegiance.

For Lady Margaret Beauchamp, whom he had selected from among so many beauties to win him his wager, showed herself wholly insensible of the honour he had done her. In vain had he besieged her heart with all the arts known to wooers, arts which had subjugated many a more experienced opponent; she received all his gallantries with a preoccupied smile or an irrelevant answer. Already seven whole days of the precious three weeks had passed, and he found himself not a step nearer attainment. The affair worried him, it took his thoughts from his work, he felt his reputation was at stake. Yet how can a man win the heart of a lady, unless the lady will, at least, give her full mind to the defending of it?

In a very few days St John had divined the existence of a rival in the thoughts of the lady, and he sought eagerly to discover his identity. But in vain. Lady Margaret's indifference to her many avowed suitors was too cheerful to be affected, and he rightly judged her alike too proud and too clever to let her fancy loose upon one of your handsome, mysterious, passion-breathing incognitos who lay traps for the hearts of wealthy heiresses.

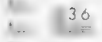
Yet some deep interest it was that held her cold to his advances, and if not love, then what remained save the only other game worth playing,—Politics? The position of her patches as well as the reputation of her aunt pointed to the likelihood of the supposition. The cunning wooer threw gallantry to the winds, and prepared to entrap her ladyship with that most enticing snare, the confidences of a statesman.

Accordingly, when next he met her his manner be-



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trayed not a trace of the ardour of former days; he was grave, silent, almost as preoccupied as she herself had been. At once she noted and wondered at the change.

Several times he looked at her as one who wished to speak but doubted the wisdom. The sight of the queen driving past gave him his clue.

"Her Majesty is growing very frail," he said gravely; "she cannot be expected to fill the throne much longer."

The girl looked up with a sudden eagerness.

"Then the question of the Succession will at last be settled, let us hope for ever," he continued.

"I had believed it already assured to the Elector of Hanover, according to the terms of the recent peace," said the girl, questioningly.

"Which terms are not yet ratified, madame," he answered with meaning emphasis. "The friends of Hanover are working their utmost at present to confirm their hopes. The question must be settled within the next few months. It is for all—er—politicals to be equally alert."

Margaret's eyes were bright, her glance eager, her interest unaffected. And it was the question of the Succession that had brought about this change. There was no doubt about it, amazing though it appeared, politics had caught her!

Much work was awaiting the Secretary when he went home that evening, but he pushed it all aside. He drew a decanter of wine to his side, and sat late into the night carefully reviewing all his experiences with the opposite sex. And the more he recollected, the more certain he became that it could not be the dry interest of abstract politics that rivalled his gallantries in the heart of so young and lovely a girl as Margaret Beauchamp. It must be the Man behind the Cause. Then what man, save that hero of so much romantic devotion, the Chevalier St George.

"Madame, have you ever seen the Chevalier St George?" he asked her abruptly the following afternoon, when they leaned together over the bows of a barge, sailing down to Hampton.

Margaret started, looked up quickly, and flushed crimson at the question.

"I—I have never been out of England, my lord," she stammered, slowly.

"I have a great curiosity to see him," continued St John calmly, with an eye on her confusion. "His portraits speak him true Stuart, but more resembling his uncle than King James."

"His portraits! Yes. But I do not think his portraits do him justice," she answered, unguardedly. "They bear a superficial likeness to him certainly, but he is more—I cannot explain it, perhaps it is but the difference betwixt the living face and the pictured."

He looked at her curiously.

"I thought, madame, you had never seen him?"

She flushed crimson. "One learns much from report," she murmured vaguely.

"Ay, but reports differ so greatly. Now from some I hear he is always merry, others say he is melancholy to a fault. Which would you suppose to be the truth?"

"The former assuredly," she answered, with a very tender smile.

All that afternoon St John kept his place by Margaret's side, though soft eyes pleaded with him for his notice, and fair faces clouded at his indifference. He talked to her exclusively of politics, told her many wholly unimportant secrets, discussed with her many measures he had no intention of bringing forward, and ever and anon he threw a side glance at St Germain's, with suggestions as to the future of the Stuart Cause. Nor was he slow to remark how her interest waned, even when he gave her his most enticing confidences, but returned at the slightest allusion to the Chevalier St George.

"Plague take these Princes!" he muttered ruefully, as he settled to his evening's work. "Royalty in misfortune and empty crowns are unfair advantages for any man."

And then he fell to wondering why this sudden overwhelming interest in the Prince occupied Lady Margaret's thoughts. She had always been known for a staunch Tory, and Miss Cochrane's devotion to the Stuart was common knowledge; but a fortnight ago he could have sworn the girl had thoughts for nothing except the latest

merry-making or the newest mode. The Secretary was a man with eyes for every shade of change in man or woman; he knew he was not mistaken in believing Margaret altered, preoccupied, ten thousand times more Jacobite than before. And gradually he came to the belief that some fresh scheme was afoot, some intrigue with which he was unacquainted, and this girl knew of it.

For the last few months the quarrels in the Cabinet and the struggle with the Whigs had occupied all his energies; he had held but little intercourse with St Germain's or with the Jacobite spies,—indeed since the Fenwick scare he had been in every way more prudent,—but now he felt himself neglected. If, as he surmised, the Prince was again taking action, urged to it possibly by the unfavourable terms of the peace, then it was essential he should know of it, should at least have opportunity to reap some benefit from it, either by the support or the disclosure of the plot.

Time was never wasted by Secretary St John; to resolve was to act. Before morning a special messenger, a man in whom even he reposed absolute confidence, was speeding to St Germain's, with a letter which he was instructed to deliver into the Prince's own hands, and to return without delay.

But all this brought Mr Secretary not a whit nearer the attainment of his lady's favour. St John was above all things thorough; he hated defeat in small things as much as in great, and he felt that for one with his reputation to fail in a contest with so young and simple a girl would be nothing short of ridiculous. He resolved to devote himself to the siege with still greater fervour, and by any means subdue the stubborn fair.

Accordingly, the following day he proceeded early to her house, attired and perruqued with the most consummate care—for he believed no living woman totally insensible to the influence of dress—and prepared to bring his most powerful arts to the siege.

Now it so befell that the door was opened to St John by the under-footman, a creature of his own, who had served him in other such affairs in other places; for the cunning Secretary was by no means blind to the unique influence

and utility of the servants' parlour. Learning that Lady Margaret was occupied with her man of affairs and at home to no one else, the Viscount instantly conceived the notion of taking her by surprise, of catching her alone all unprepared for resistance, and so gaining a post of vantage from which to direct his powerful attack. A few words to the footman, and all befell as he wished. Contrary to all orders, Viscount Bolingbroke was ushered without previous warning into the presence of Lady Margaret and Monsieur Lebrun, with whom, as chance willed it, she was at that moment alone.

The effect was such as he had hoped. Lady Margaret started to her feet on his entrance, and looked at him in dismay; all her habitual calmness and self-confidence had deserted her. Unmoved alike by the angry glances she directed towards the footman, and by her cold greeting to himself, St John bowed gallantly over her hand, and seating himself boldly beside her on the settee at once opened his attack. He took small note of the other occupant of the room, her ladyship's man of affairs; and indeed Lebrun, on the Viscount's entrance, withdrew to the far end of the chamber, and taking up his position at a table with his back to the guest, listened curiously and jealously to the conversation of his rival.

St John opened his attack with man's strongest weapon against woman—silence. He looked, sighed, played with his hat—conduct so different from his customary ease and eloquence—that Margaret eyed him with surprise. He made no attempt to open the conversation, and the silence worked on her nerves. Her annoyance at his unexpected entrance vanished in curiosity.

Then, as he still eyed her silently, she grew anxious about her appearance; feared lest he found her morning-gown less modish than he had expected, supposed she vied unfavourably with Lady Darcy, Miss Croker, and other rival beauties. Finally, reduced to a state of utter nervousness and diffidence, she stammered out her surprise at seeing him so early, and her interest in the reason of his visit.

"I am here, madame, because I could not keep away," he answered, bluntly.

The girl started, blushed, and turned to him in amazement. St John smiled a trite sadly and continued,—

“Will you pretend amazement, madame, at finding another adorer in your power?”

But Lady Margaret was a reigning toast, no inexperienced country damsel to be tripped by any compliment a man might choose to throw at her feet. Moreover, Viscount Bolingbroke, in such affairs as this, might well be likened to the misnamed proverbial dog. So the girl met his look and words with a sceptical smile.

“I should indeed be monstrously amazed,” she answered, smiling, “were I asked to believe Viscount Bolingbroke the adorer—of any woman.”

But St John met her with no answering smile.

“Do you then deem me so insensible, madame?” he asked, sighing almost inaudibly. “But perchance it is as well. Why should I seek your pity, save only that it is called by some the food of love?”

The man seated at the far end of the room shut his book with an angry bang, and shuffled noisily among his papers. St John glanced at him carelessly, as one might glance at a noisy bluebottle. To him a secretary was a nonentity; before a footman he might have hesitated to speak, but hardly before a humble man of letters.

But Margaret flushed crimson at the sound, and glanced nervously across at Lebrun.

“I protest, sir,” she continued mockingly, “your vows come too late. Lady Acton has betrayed you to her sex. Let me warn you, my Lord Viscount, wagers are not so lightly won.”

“Wagers!” he cried, angrily. “Indeed, madame, you are unjust.”

“Do you then deny the wager, sir?”

“No, madame—but that I now seek to win it. Lady Margaret, you are little accustomed to blunt speeches,—hear one now, I beseech you. Consider how seldom I had enjoyed your company before I took that wager, how much I have pleased in it since. Consider that—look in your mirror—and—if you still doubt my honesty—I can say no more, madame.”

Stammering, hesitating, his words fell from him, as though he were half unwilling to speak them. Lady Margaret stared at him in doubt and amazement. Was this St John, the man who "spoke with the tongue of angels," whose persuasive eloquence even his bitterest enemies could scarcely resist? What had robbed him of his fluency? What but an emotion more real than any he had hitherto experienced? The girl blushed, ashamed of the triumph of the thought, and sat silent with doubt.

"I have no right to ask even your belief, madame," he continued, softly,—"I, who have lost my life among the weeds ere I lifted my eyes to the rose. I would not weary you, madame, but—have you not even pity to spare for an adorer who comes too late to offer aught save a despairing homage?"

Lebrun rose abruptly, and striding across to the bookcase, noisily pulled a volume from the shelf. Lady Margaret watched him nervously, but St John never lifted his eyes from her face.

"Not one word to throw to me, madame?" he breathed softly.

"What would you have me say, sir?" asked the girl, eyeing her secretary anxiously.

"Only that you forgive me, Lady Margaret. That in the future—for me so hopeless, for you, Heaven grant, so bright—I may at least believe that you spare me some kindly thought, that you hold in your heart one tender memory of him who looked on your face—too late."

Margaret turned slowly and looked deep into his eyes. He met her look freely, but she noted that his face was flushed, his lips twitched nervously—unwonted signs of emotion in this self-contained Secretary of State. Her eyes fell before the ardour of his glance.

The silence annoyed Lebrun; he looked furtively over his shoulder at the couple on the settee, looked and frowned.

"Alas! May I not even hope for this small indulgence?" urged St John. "You have no hope, no pity even, to bestow?"

"I protest I am vastly moved by your professions,"

began the girl, nervously. "I will ever hold you, sir, as—as——"

"Nay, madame, as nothing but your devotee, who claims no guerdon save your pity, and hopes but for some happy chance to do you service."

"I were mannerless indeed were I ungrateful, sir."

"Then you accept my service, madame? I am the happiest of men."

Margaret glanced quickly towards Lebrun, moved by a sudden thought.

"I accept it, sir," she answered gravely. "The time may not be far off when I shall claim it."

"Heaven bring it speedily," he breathed devoutly.

Then he looked at her questioningly, and began with some hesitation.

"In days of old, madame, unless the poets lie, ladies bestowed upon their knights some favour, as it were a livery to mark their servants. May I crave——"

Margaret started and eyed him shrewdly.

"In days of old, sir, the knights were surely wont to earn their favour, not claim it as a right," she answered sharply.

He bowed humbly. "Alas! Then do I the more ardently crave opportunity for service. Give me but my quest, madame."

"All in good time, sir," she answered lightly, fencing with his urgency. Her plan was not yet matured.

St John sighed. "I must perforce submit. But I would entreat you not to keep me too long in uncertainty, lest I weary you, madame, with a passion that I cannot hide. I would not weary you with vain repetitions——"

"Then why the devil do you?"

St John sprang to his feet, purple with rage, and turned with an oath to face Lebrun. This quiet man of affairs had flung down his book with an angry crash and crossed to the Viscount's side. Lady Margaret gave a little cry of terror.

St John faced Lebrun and the oath died on his lips; slowly his anger turned to amazement. He looked from the easy cynical smile of the man to the frightened face of

the lady. Then he gave a sudden soft laugh of comprehension and bowed low to the despised "man of affairs."

"Welcome to England, your Highness!" he said courteously.

There was a moment's silence. Margaret looked anxiously at the two men. Lebrun eyed St John coolly.

"We thank you, sir," he said drily. "Your welcome is something late, but I doubt not none the less hearty for that. Indeed we have noted that the longer delayed the welcome, the more eagerly it is pressed upon us."

St John flushed.

"Had I been aware of your Highness's intention of visiting England, I had been the first to wait upon you, sir," he answered gloomily.

Lebrun gazed over the Viscount's head.

"Doubtless, doubtless," he drawled. "While our affairs were still unsettled, we informed none save our trusted supporters of our intentions."

He turned and looked meaningly at Lady Margaret; she rose.

"Have I your Highness's leave to retire?" she said anxiously.

"We must not keep you longer from your ride," he answered ceremoniously.

St John handed her to the door. As he bowed over her hand at parting she whispered softly: "Behold your quest, Sir Knight," and threw him an earnest glance ere she retired. Lebrun noted the incident and frowned jealously.

When the door was closed behind the lady, Lebrun threw himself idly into a chair. He felt, and profited by, his advantage over St John, who was perforce obliged to remain standing. For the same reason Lebrun prolonged the silence, playing idly with her ladyship's spaniel. He was unwontedly nervous of this keen-eyed Secretary, and knew well the value of a little insolence in one whose right to use it could not be called in question.

But silence could not be indefinitely prolonged, the interview could not now be avoided, and Lebrun plunged into it at length with his customary recklessness.

"So, Mr Secretary," he began, "we meet at last. What

have you to tell us with regard to the state of feeling in the country?"

"Little new, sir. Your Highness will have read my last report, sent through Father John."

Lebrun played nervously with the catch of his snuff-box.

"Diable!" he said quickly. "We receive so many reports, assurances, and protestations—and not one worth a sou! We require a little courage, Mr Secretary—courage and sacrifice."

"I hardly think the present time is the occasion for either, sir," answered St John, rather sulkily. "Your Highness's cause would scarce be profited by the present sacrifice of your Highness's friends."

"We give small thanks for such thoughts as yours, Viscount," snapped Lebrun.

"Has your Highness then found affairs in this country more satisfactory than they were represented?"

"So much so, my friend, that we have wondered whether our friends' eagerness to urge delay and prudence be not prompted by other motives than anxiety for the safety of our person," drawled Lebrun, watching St John out of the corners of his eyes.

The Secretary was annoyed, puzzled. As far as it was possible, in days when in truth a man's right hand scarce knew the doings of his left, he believed himself master of the political leanings of all the influential men of his country; more than any other man, he had believed himself *au fait* with the Jacobite plans. Yet here, unknown to him, was the Prince himself in London, and (it would appear) deep in schemes of which he himself knew nothing, and fully confident of speedy success. Never in his life had he been more thoroughly nonplussed. His vexation showed itself in looks and words.

"Your Highness would meet with more open support and sacrifice if you would repose more open confidence in your supporters," he muttered sulkily.

"It is with that end in view that we have endangered our person by coming to our country. We could scarcely give clearer token of our trust in our friends. And Santa Anna! we have not hitherto found it misplaced."

St John stood silent. Suddenly Lebrun sprang to his feet with a laugh, and laid his hand on the Secretary's shoulder.

"Well, well," he said good-humouredly, "since Fate has willed we should entrust you also with our secret, we will entrust you to the full. See to it, in the future, that you deserve our confidence. The extent of our reward will not be dictated to us by the jealousy of any Minister of State."

St John's eyes gleamed at this reference to Oxford's influence with the Queen, and Lebrun marked well that his shot had told. He extended his hand graciously, and the Secretary bowed low.

"I can only assure Your Highness," he said eagerly, "I have ever been devoted to your interests, and have only refrained from more open espousal of your cause, in the belief that I could better serve your Highness in my present position."

"Humph!" muttered Lebrun.

St John flushed. "I protest, sir," he urged, "both Bishop Atterbury and Father John have most foully libelled me if they have represented me as otherwise than devoted to your Highness. If you will permit me to meet them in your Highness's presence, I swear they shall speak more truly. May I entreat you to appoint an occasion and let me hear openly of what they accuse me?"

Lebrun's fingers twitched nervously, but he answered coolly enough.

"It is not our purpose to spread strife among our supporters, Mr Secretary; rather to unite them more closely by our presence among them. Suffice it that your loyalty has been questioned; it is not our will that you should know by whom."

"I have a right to meet my accusers," began St John angrily. Lebrun stopped him.

"Those who would serve us, Mr Secretary, have no 'rights,'" he answered with dignity.

The door opened, and Captain Drummond entered. He started at sight of St John, and satisfaction gleamed in his eyes. He crossed to the inner room and began to sort

papers at a table, but not before his appearance had wrought extraordinary effect upon the Secretary. For Viscount Bolingbroke, among his many qualities, possessed that most inestimable gift, an untailing memory for faces. A face once seen by him was never forgotten, and he had seen and marked Captain Drummond when the latter was in the service of the Duchess of Marlborough. The sight of him here, the confidential servant of the Prince, opened out probabilities which fairly overwhelmed the shrewd Secretary. For what more likely than that the Duke, driven to desperation by the treatment which he and his had received at the hands of the present Government, should throw in his lot with the Jacobites? The greater part of the army would follow their leader, and how many dissatisfied Whigs no man could say. If the Prince could succeed in steering a clear course between the jealousies that would necessarily arise between his tried supporters in the Tory Ministry and these new adherents, the Jacobite cause was won. The Prince's confidence was evidence that he, at least, believed in his success.

All this flashed through Secretary St John's mind on recognising Drummond. Further, he saw now why he had been excluded from the confidence of the Prince. But he had sufficient faith in his own usefulness to believe that the Jacobite cause could not long do without him, and though resolved not to be left out of any promising scheme, he was likewise resolved only to give his services at their full worth.

"Your Highness would have no further doubt of my faith had you received the letter which I despatched to St Germain's but three days ago," he urged. "My messenger will find his errand vain."

Lebrun started, but quickly recovered himself, and answered with a yawn: "Your despatch will be received by those whom we left in authority. What was the import of the message?"

"It was an assurance of my absolute devotion to your Highness's cause—an offer of all assistance in my power to further your interests in this country."

Lebrun's eyes gleamed. "It was in part to obtain such

assurances, under hand and seal, from the less courageous of our adherents that we have ventured our person here."

"I am happy to be able to give your Highness my assurances in person," said St John.

"Humph!" muttered Lebrun. "You will understand, Viscount Bolingbroke, that such protestations are for many reasons more satisfactory when delivered under signature."

St John looked up quickly and suspiciously. He scented a trap. He had the greatest admiration for the statesmanship of the Duke of Marlborough. He knew that no man understood better the wisdom of clearing away rivals from his path. He recognised himself as such a rival.

"Your Highness will find such a paper awaiting you on your return to St Germain," he said quickly, resolved to assure his position in the Prince's confidence before such return.

Lebrun saw the suspicion in the Secretary's eyes, and attributed it to a doubt of his identity.

"We are not at present contemplating a speedy return," he said, turning aside from the keen glance of the Secretary.

There was a moment's silence. Lebrun fidgetted nervously. Suddenly he threw back his shoulders with a little defiant laugh that puzzled St John still further.

"Enough of politics," he cried lightly. "You will sup with us to-morrow evening, Bolingbroke? Whatever may have been inferred with regard to your loyalty, none have ever questioned your judgment with regard to wine—or women."

St John perforce bowed his acceptance of this command.

"Women!" muttered Lebrun. "By the way, Bolingbroke, our fair hostess has sufficient occupation for her thoughts in the exercising of her present loyal hospitality. We do not wish her to be—further—er—wearied."

Lebrun faced St John steadily, and the latter understood his meaning.

He flushed, but the present totally unexpected political complications were sufficient to occupy even his versatile mind. Henry St John could never relinquish an enterprise

without some regret, yet in the present instance he was willing to let the wager go if necessary. But he shrewdly suspected that it might not prove necessary: rather the morning's discovery, instead of destroying, would increase his chance of success by putting the lady more in his power.

Lebrun chatted a few minutes longer, turning the conversation on to tennis—a game at which the Prince was known to be an enthusiast. Then he dismissed the Secretary with one final warning.

"We are aware that you can read men, Mr Secretary; but you are not infallible. There are those among our adherents whose loyalty you may consider unquestionable, but to whom we have not thought fit to confide our plans. You will therefore do well to guard an absolute silence upon the subject of our presence in England."

St John took his leave, more convinced than ever that this venture of the Prince was organised by some new and powerful adherents, who regarded with jealous eyes the influence of the whilom leaders of the Jacobite cause. He resolved that Fate, having made him master of this secret, should now bend to his will and make him indispensable to the Prince.

Drummond remained in the inner room until the bustle in the hall below announced the departure of the Secretary. Then he joined Lebrun, whom he found sitting dejectedly on the end of the sofa, plunged in thought. He looked up quickly on seeing Drummond; his expression was a mixture of recklessness and despair.

"Drummond," he said quickly, "he suspects us. I wager anything he suspects us."

"Impossible! He has never seen the Prince. Why should he suspect? What makes you think it?"

"I read it in his face. We've got a fish too big for our net this time."

"All the more reason, then, to play the game boldly."

"Santa Anna! How the devil can I play the Prince with that man's eyes marking every slip? We shall never catch him."

"Not in his senses, but in his cups we may. We must

dine him until we do. Between us our wits ought to outlast his."

"Yes, I defy him to drink me fuddled. But, plague take him! he has sent a messenger to St Germain's."

"Whom I doubt not will be received by those left in authority there," quoted Drummond.

Lebrun laughed. "My kingdom to see his face when the messenger returns," he cried.

"Fortunately his Highness is not speedy in transacting his affairs: we shall be away long before St John is likely to get his answer."

Any reference to the end of their adventure and their subsequent departure always plunged Lebrun into moody silence: he said no more.

The following evening the three men supped together. Lebrun was in a mood of such reckless gaiety that Drummond trembled for the safety of their secret, but his very ease and boldness disarmed suspicion. St John's shrewd sense never lasted long under the influence of wine and women; he was presently as open-hearted as his host, and had not Lebrun's nerve failed him, they might have enmeshed the Secretary that very night. As it was, they learned enough of his thoughts to understand the ground of his suspicions, and made full use of the Duke of Marlborough's name.

Three nights later St John was again commanded to sup with the Prince, and when, late in the evening, the whole Jacobite plot (as conceived by Lebrun) was opened to him, he viewed it in the rosy light of the wine-cup, and would have had no compunction about putting his seal to any document that might entitle him to a share in the booty.

So, enticed by an earldom and netted by the wine, the great fish was caught.

And the next morning, St John, waking with a headache, was informed that his messenger had returned from St Germain's, and learned from him that the packet had been delivered into the very hands of the Prince himself. He questioned the man keenly, but the fellow was steadfast in his assurance that he had seen and spoken with the Prince himself at St Germain's but three days since, and St John

knew the man both too faithful to deceive him and too cunning himself to be deceived.

Then in the sober light of morning the Secretary sat and viewed the trap into which he had walked. For if he were not the Prince, this man to whom he had signed away his loyalty, he knew he must be the tool of an enemy.

The Secretary was brave—more, he was reckless—but he did not relish the situation in which he found himself. If he were to arrest the Pretender, and bring him to trial as an impostor, who could tell what influence he had behind him? Moreover, the necessary revelations inseparable from the publicity of the trial would be sufficient to damn St John in the eyes of his party. Yet to let things slide and calmly await the issue, hoping to prove the papers forgeries, was more than his patience could endure.

But two alternatives remained, to buy the man or to remove him, and of the two the latter appealed to him more as being both more economical and also more thorough. Secretary St John was before all things thorough.

VII.

The day before they finally entrapped St John, Mrs Masham had conveyed to the Prince the required assurance of Lord Oxford's loyalty. She had the more easily procured this in that Harley, relying implicitly on her knowledge of the Queen's disposition towards her brother, followed her lead willingly in all matters connected with the great question of the Succession. Moreover, when was Lord Oxford known to deny anything to Abigail Hill?

So they had netted their three big fish, and had no further excuse for continuing the masquerade. Drummond that night advised speedy departure, urged as much thereto by the increasing danger he saw in the intercourse between Lebrun and Margaret as by the achievement of their aims. But Lebrun still sought to delay, still advanced excuses. He was in the condition of the lover who, forgetting the past, ignoring the future, lives to the full each present moment, blind alike to hope, fear, or prudence.

"Where is the hurry, man?" he urged. "We hold the papers safe enough, the Duchess is sure of success. In the meantime there are many more fish in the sea; who knows but we may hook another?"

"Every day discovery is more likely. Why keep up the farce longer? What do you expect? Whatever happens we must be exposed in a day or two; it is a choice whether we do it for ourselves or have it done for us."

Lebrun winced. "Gad! I don't see why Miss Cochrane should ever know whom she has entertained," he argued. "Bargain with her Grace to keep the affair quiet; no one need ever know how she procured the papers. I would as lief spare the feelings of—Miss Cochrane."

Drummond eyed him sharply.

"Agreed!" he said, slowly, "on condition you ride with me to St Albans to-morrow."

"Why to-morrow?"

"Because the roses will not lose their sweetness though you wait another day," said Drummond, meaningly. For himself he could not understand why Lebrun should wish to lengthen his torture; the end was sure.

So that night, when Lady Margaret went to her room, the verses which lay on her table were lines of farewell, and she slept but little, dreading what she knew must come.

Lebrun was reckless. He knew the folly of his dreams; he knew that after that day he would see her no more, would live in her memory at best but as the king, at worst as an impostor. There was no hope for him. And yet if she loved him! He knew his dreams were folly; but he dreamed still.

He was reckless. To-morrow was for others, but to-day should be his own.

After the morning chocolate he engaged Lady Margaret for cards. She looked amazed at the suggestion, but made no objections: they settled early to picquet. Miss Cochrane worked apart, and Drummond hovered near. Presently Miss Cochrane was summoned: her *modiste* had come by appointment. Lebrun blessed the *modiste* as he dealt the cards.

"We will not detain you, Captain Drummond," he said, calmly.

Drummond turned and stared. Margaret was sorting the cards; Lebrun eyed his companion defiantly.

"You can leave us, sir," he repeated.

For a moment Drummond hesitated, wondering whether to risk all by a refusal; then he left them together.

Lebrun laid down his cards.

"Madame," he began, softly, "I leave you to-night."

She caught her breath in a little cry: "So soon!"

"Had I my will, madame, the night that parts us should never fall. Do you believe me, madame?"

"I—I would you need not leave us so soon, Sire," she faltered.

"I am a coward, madame, I cannot stay longer; I dare not. Yet let what may befall me now, let men say what they may of that which I have done, at least I have loved you; and in life, in death, Margaret, I will never forget you more."

He leaned across the table, softly touching her hand, and in his low, caressing voice repeated the lines he had written for his farewell.

She sat silent with downcast eyes, but he saw her breast heaving to her sobs.

"Bid me farewell, Margaret," he whispered.

She raised to him piteous eyes, dark with tears. "Ah: Sire," she whispered, "must you go—to-night?"

Then he threw prudence to the winds; he would resist no longer.

"Margaret, you love me! you love me!" he cried in exultation.

She shook her head. "Ah, no, Sire! No, indeed no."

He laughed softly. "Then, Margaret, I love you," he whispered. "Love you, ay, with all my heart, with all my being. I love you, dear; and you—you will pity me a little, will you not? And pity shall grow to love. Indeed I think you love me a little, sweet, already."

But she, trembling at his pleading, still held him from her, still denied her love.

"Ah! Sire, it is impossible," she sobbed. "I may be

your true friend ; I will be more to you than I will ever be to any man, but—more is impossible."

"Impossible!" he flung the word aside. "Why must it be so, Margaret?"

"Ah! Sire, you forget. You are the king."

"The king!" He started. "The king! Ay; but women have loved kings ere now."

"And will do so again," she whispered, softly, "and to their own undoing."

He sprang again to her side, pouring forth he knew not what wild vows and protestations. She raised her clasped hands in entreaty to stop him.

"Ah! Sire," she cried, pleading as much with herself as with him. "Remember your work, remember your duties to your country. A king may not love where he will. Let it not be said of me that I have brought ruin on my sovereign, on my country. Ah! Sire, help me, help me to be strong. Remember you are the king."

"Margaret!" he whispered, "if I were not the king?"

She rose and looked at him with a strange smile. Suddenly she took his hand and pulled him towards the window.

"Look," she cried, softly, pointing into the street below, "there is a beggar, wretched—filthy in his rags. Were you even as he, I would follow you barefoot through the world to do you service. Only so you were not the king."

He caught her in his arms.

"What man could endure this?" he cried. "Margaret, we will have no more of this play of kingship. I am but a man—a man, dear, as you are queen of women. I defy heaven and earth to come between us now."

She stood a moment clinging to him. Then she drew away and shook her head.

"Sire! you are God's anointed. This must be good-bye."

"Good-bye! Never! Margaret, you do not hear me. I tell you I am not the king. I tell you I am but a man. I have done with this Princeship. Margaret, I am no Prince. I am a beggar."

Still she did not understand.

"You talk wildly, beloved," she whispered, sadly.

"As heaven is above us, I swear to you it is the truth," he continued, desperately. "I am no king. I am a beggar, an impostor, a poor devil, God knows, not fit to touch your hand, but not, thank Heaven, not James Stuart."

She stood silent, trembling. He could not see her face.

"Is this true?" she said at last, in low, dull tones.

"As true as my love for you," he answered, softly.

She loosed his arm from her waist, and turning, sat on the low window-seat, with averted face.

"Be so kind, sir, as to explain to me your meaning," she said, in the same low tone.

So he told her his story, hesitating, stumbling, looking eagerly for any movement, any sign of her thoughts. But she sat rigid, with averted face, till the end.

"Do you then hate the Stuart so much?" she asked, when he was silent.

"I have good cause," he muttered. "But I confess I am no politician; neither love nor hatred were my motives."

"What reason, then, what possible motive, could you have had?"

"The strongest a man can have, madame,—hunger."

She stared. She could not understand. None who have never felt want could understand.

"Go, sir," she said, wearily, "go, and never let me see you more."

He flung up his head in defiance of fortune and crossed to her side.

"Go! Never! Never till you look me in the face and say you do not love me."

Slowly she turned her head. Her face was white, tears dimmed her eyes, and her lip quivered, but she answered steadily:

"I do not love—an impostor."

He winced. "So, madame, after all it was the Prince you loved?" he said, bitterly.

"Cruel!" she murmured.

"Where then lies the difference?"

"You have deceived me."

"I have played the Prince to you—and to others; but

have I harmed you by that? In what else have I deceived you? Not in my love, Margaret."

She was silent. He drew nearer and touched her hand. "Madame, what you saw to love in the Prince, Heaven and a woman's tender heart alone can say; but such as it was, you loved it; and such as it was, is it not in the man even as in the Prince?"

She drew in her breath. "Ah! but it is so different," she muttered.

He pointed to the window. "There's but the difference of a borrowed coat between that beggar and myself now, madame."

She flushed. "When I spoke so, I thought I was speaking to—a Prince, if you will—at least to a true man risking his life for his country——"

"Risking his life!" interrupted Lebrun, with a laugh. "Do you dream, madame, were the Prince in my place he risked his life? Never! At worst it were but a short imprisonment. They would smuggle him out of the country rather than add another martyr to their list. No, the Prince were safe enough. But for me——!" he stopped abruptly. He would not win her through pity.

"For you——?" she urged him to speak.

"What mercy, madame, think you would be shown to an impostor, a common malefactor—forcing his way in disguise into a house, obtaining hospitality under false pretences——?"

She clasped her hands tightly. "They would kill you?" she asked breathlessly.

"*Per Bacco!* I should not long trouble Newgate's hospitality."

She looked at him strangely. "So you too risk your life?" she asked.

He laughed lightly. "Why, so does every man—a thousand times a day, did he but know it. The only difference betwixt myself and the Prince is that I value my life at four hundred crowns, and your supposed Prince would risk his for one."

She shook her head. "I do not understand," she said wearily.

He knelt beside her, but he did not touch her.

"No; you cannot understand, dear," he said softly. "Why should you try? What in this wide world is worth understanding except Love?"

She shivered and drew back.

"Margaret," he pleaded, "I am an impostor, a beggar at your door! but such as I am, I am yours—body and soul. I love you; and, beloved, the heart I give to you has never been touched by any other woman."

He paused, and in the pause she moved her hand a little until it rested against his sleeve.

"Bid me go, dear, and I will ask no more of you than to worship you as I worship my mother in heaven. But love me, Margaret, love me! and, God helping me, nothing on earth shall stand betwixt you and happiness."

"Alas!" she whispered, "we women are so weak."

"Not weak," he cried—"strong! Weakness lies in fearing love. The weak fly from it, dread it; they fence their hearts with prudence and conventions to bar Love out. But the strong fling wide the door, and go gladly forth to greet it."

"I think I would still keep my door closed," she whispered, "but you have opened it."

"Ay! opened it wide, beloved, to the sunshine and the glory of the world."

She put her arms about his neck. "Dear, my king!" she whispered.

He drew her to him, crying exultantly, "King! Ay! lord of a prouder realm than any Stuart of them all."

She started, and a look of trouble crossed her face.

"Ah!" she said, "but you make of me a traitor—a traitor to the king."

He soothed her quickly. "No, sweet, you shall never be that. You shall shelter me no longer. The game is over; I will go to-night."

"Go! Where?"

"To carve the world into a crown for my queen," he cried proudly, smiling down on her.

"Let me go with you," she pleaded.

"With me, sweet? Impossible!" he cried. Even as he

answered her the first shadow of doubt crossed his heart as he realised how impossible it was, as he measured his life with hers.

"Ah! not impossible," she pleaded sweetly. "I am so strong, and I do not think I have any fear—I should have none with you."

He looked at her with wonder.

"Would you go with me, Margaret?" he asked slowly. "Would you marry me to-morrow, and follow me out into the world?"

"Do I not love you?" she answered simply. "Is Love afraid?"

"Dear angel!" he whispered. "Heaven make me worthy of such love."

"Then you will take me with you?" she urged.

He shook his head. "Not to-morrow, beloved. Indeed, it is impossible. But I will come again when I have my commission, and then we need never part. It will be but a few months of parting. You will wait for me?"

"I will follow you ever, or wait for you ever. I am yours."

He held her in his arms. Suddenly she freed herself from his embrace, and looked up blushing. Captain Drummond had entered the room.

Drummond stood silent, fighting the jealousy that surged in his heart. Margaret turned to him with a shy smile.

"You see how it is with us," she said gently. "You have brought me much happiness, Captain Drummond."

Drummond crushed down his jealousy at sight of her radiant face, and turned reproachfully on Lebrun.

"Do I speak to his Royal Highness, or to Monsieur Lebrun?" he asked.

"Monsieur Lebrun has told me all," interposed Margaret gently.

"And Lady Margaret has forgiven all," added Lebrun. "We have won the game; you have the papers. There is no harm done to you."

"No," answered Drummond, his eyes still fixed upon the girl's face. "No, there is no harm to me."

"We leave here to-night," continued Lebrun; but Margaret interposed quickly—

"Ah! not to-night. We are bidden to a *fête* at my Lord Hastings'. I should even now be dressing. I must go, else it would lead to questioning. My aunt must not know of this—yet," she explained hesitatingly. "She would never forgive the—the intrigue against his Majesty. And she has no pity upon her enemies. So I must go with her this evening. But ah! do you stay till to-morrow, that I may see you yet once again before you go. I cannot bear it else. Do not go to-night."

"So be it, beloved; I will not go to-night," he promised her, and, content with that, she left him.

When they were alone together Lebrun turned on Drummond.

"I have fulfilled our contract," he said. "The Duchess will have nothing to complain of. This is my affair."

Drummond moved to the window. "What do you purpose?" he asked.

Lebrun unfolded his plans eagerly.

"We have the papers. To-morrow to the Duchess. I start life again with one hundred pounds in pocket and a post under the Duke. Thanks to these" (he tapped his breast where the precious letters lay), "the Duke will again have command of the army, and it will go hard with him if the peace is ratified. He will see to it that is prevented; and if not—there is the army under Eugene, or the war in the East. Give me a sword, and I'll warrant I'll find a way to fortune."

"So Lady Margaret Beauchamp is to follow the drum?" asked Drummond quietly.

Lebrun winced. "She will make a brave wife for a soldier," he answered defiantly.

Drummond remembered how she had faced the rabble that first day he met with her. A fit mate for any man, he thought.

"You have been to the Court at Frohsdorf?" he asked slowly.

"Yes," answered Lebrun, surprised at the question.

"Did you see there the picture of the Princess Anna of

Harlstadt? A child's face, all blue eyes and innocence. Straight from a convent she married a soldier of Fortune, and followed him into the world. In six months she died."

Lebrun moved impatiently. "It was because her husband neglected her," he urged. "The hardships need not be so great"

"It was not the hardship that killed her."

"What then?"

"The life and company," answered Drummond quietly. "There are many things in the world a woman should not see. In three months she had learned them all—and died! Heavens!" he broke out fiercely, pointing to a dainty miniature of Margaret that hung on the wall beside him, "look at that face! What companions for her were Moll and Kate—the women of camp and guard-room? What life for her the common life of garrison and field?"

Lebrun sat silent, his eyes fixed on the portrait.

"You are right," he said at last. "Camp life is not for her. But what then? There are other things in the world besides a sword. Politics. Godolphin shall give me a secretaryship."

"Which you will lose on the next change of Ministry."

"Gad! Others have made their way in politics despite all the Ministers in Christendom. Why not I?"

"They did not begin their career by making enemies of such men as Bolingbroke; more—of the Queen herself. She may be driven to dismiss her Abigail and Oxford, she will not thank the man who has forced the necessity upon her. No, politics are not for you."

Lebrun rose and strode the room in desperation.

"Devil take you, Drummond!" he cried. "You'd drive a saint to despair. There are surely many paths to fortune."

"Not such as Lady Margaret can tread."

"Then I will follow them alone. She will wait for me, dear saint, until I can win her."

"Ay, she will wait! And what life is it for a woman, that life of waiting? Year after year, without hope, with-

out sympathy, and the end—loneliness. Would you condemn her to that? Think of Miss Cochrane—think, man, of your mother."

Lebrun turned away. "What would you have me do?" he asked brokenly.

"Go—even as you came—an impostor."

"Leave her! Never! Let the stars fall, let the earth be swallowed up in the sea, nothing shall part me from her now, now that I know what she is. Leave her, did you say?" He laughed at the thought.

"Ay, leave her, without explanation or good-bye," repeated Drummond quietly.

"Santa Anna! am I a stone? an icicle?" he raved. "I tell you I love her; I shall always love her, here and hereafter, if there be memory in the grave. Love her! I worship her."

Drummond made a gesture of scorn. "What then? I talked of her, not of you."

"I t she loves me. Dear angel, how she loves me! It would break her heart."

"Not when she knew she had given it to an impostor—that the love-making was only part of the play."

"She would not believe that."

"What else should she believe? Look, man, you have nothing to offer her: there are a thousand chances against success. Loving you, her future is without hope. But if you leave here secretly to-night while she is away, if you let her believe your vows but an added polish to the part, her pride will soon heal her pain. She—she will marry one of her own people, and live a happy woman's life, the life to which she was born."

Lebrun stood silent, his back to his companion, gazing at Margaret's picture.

Drummond moved to his side.

"What setting could you give to such a face?" he asked.

"You are right," answered Lebrun huskily; "I will go."

Drummond laid his hand on the other's shoulder.

"There are some men in the world," he said softly,

"men such as you—and I, who may never hope to know—a home."

The door opened, and Margaret entered. Dazzling she stood in white and silver, like a vision of sunlight on a stormy day. Her eyes glowed brightly; at her bosom was a bunch of white roses.

"I have come to say good-bye," she said, smiling on Lebrun. "Auntie is waiting below; I must not keep her, but I shall see you to-night."

Lebrun stooped to kiss her hand. "To-night, beloved," he promised huskily. He drew her towards him and kissed the roses at her breast. "My pure white rose!" he murmured, and let her go.

The two men stood silent till they heard the wheels of the coach on the street below. Then Lebrun turned to Drummond with the cynical smile curling his lips.

"I have played my part to the end," he said bitterly. "There never was a Stuart yet who kept his word to a woman."

VIII.

In a quarter of an hour after Lady Margaret's departure the two men were on horseback; Lebrun wore high collar and a soft hat to cover his tell-tale face. They rode first to the Bell Inn, a neighbouring hostelry where Joseph was quartered until his master should again be able to make use of his services. But Joseph was out, so they left word for him to follow them to the sign of "The Duke of Marlbro'," near Kilburn, where they had decided to spend the night, riding the next day to St Albans. The inn stood a half mile beyond the village; it was a quiet house, and for that reason much frequented by Captain Drummond.

The men gave their message to the porter at the "Bell" and rode on their way, and so spared one, Silas Jones, shoemaker's apprentice (who shadowed them), a steady five miles' tramp in pursuit. For the porter was own brother to Silas, and knew better than most the reason why this hard-worked apprentice was permitted to spend so much of his time lolling under the trees in the Green

Park, or carrying messages from Mistress Susan Willis to her father.

As they rode down St James's, Lebrun saw Viscount Bolingbroke's horse at his door, waiting to carry its master to the *fête* which Lady Margaret also attended. He clenched his fists and muttered a string of curses at the thought that this man, that all men, might meet her freely, talk with her, take her hand, and he alone must never see her more. Captain Drummond likewise noted the horse, but who shall say what were his thoughts? He rode by in silence.

Viscount Bolingbroke was a busy man. He had many axes of his own to grind, and incidentally much business to conduct for the State. Moreover, he was uneasy at heart on account of the news which had reached him that day from St Germain. But busy and anxious though he might be, he never neglected the smallest of his pursuits, and having perfected all arrangements for the ensuring of his escape from the Whig intrigue, wherein he was netted, he lightly donned his newest coat and best embroidered waistcoat, and rode off to the *fête*, to stake his last throw for the winning of his wager.

The famous "Fête of the Honey-pots," as Lord Wildmore dubbed it, was one of the most noted events of the season. All the worlds—literary, political, and social—were present; and the merriment never flagged. Being the last day of the noted wager, many eyes watched keenly the doings of the famous Ten, spying for proof of victory or disaster. The wits called it "Blenheim," for the many notable surrenders of which it was the scene.

Lady Margaret waited long for her suitor. St John was delayed in London with business of State; moreover he gauged well the heart of women, and knew the increased value of that which is tarried for. The girl watched his coming, half wishing, half fearing, his approach. Her heart was so filled with her love she gave no thought to the ruin she had helped to bring upon the Secretary; she thought only of the danger to Lebrun, should Bolingbroke too soon discover the intrigue. She wished him near her that she might be assured he was not working harm to her

love elsewhere; yet she dreaded his coming, knowing well he would talk of the Stuart and knowing how vain were her powers of dissimulation before those sharp glances. Meanwhile she paced the rose garden in company with Mr Steward and Sir Lionel Pilkerton, the latter one of the most youthful and most earnest of the dandies of the town.

"I do positively assure you, madame," he was saying, his big blue eyes wide with horror, "you could have choked me with a crumb. The fellow came into White's—White's, mind you—and after ten o'clock at night, in an orange waistcoat pleated with sky blue. I positively swear those were the colours. You saw him, Steward?"

"Egad, I did. Directly I saw him I said, 'Do I see orange and blue, or is it a lie?' Just like that I said it. 'Is it a lie?' Italy. You perceive the play upon words, madame."

"Yes, but why Italy?" asked Margaret in bewilderment.

Mr Steward sighed patiently. "Blue sky, oranges, madame. The incarnation of Italy. But perhaps your ladyship has not travelled."

Sir Lionel broke into a sudden shrill laugh.

"Ha, ha! That's devilish good, Steward. Ha! eh!"

Mr Steward smiled on him graciously. "A bagatelle," he said, with a careless shrug. "Have you heard, madame, how enraged Mrs Maitland is with Mr Addison? she swears he has taken her for his presentment of 'Fulvia' in last month's 'Spectator.'"

"Devilish clever fellow that," mused Sir Lionel, "but strange. Always wears a brown coat. Brown or grey. Not very modish. Devilish queer."

Mr Steward frowned at the interruption.

When Mrs Maitland told me of it I said, "Oh! the man's on the full via to ruin. Just like that I said it. But the lady knew no Italian—she didn't take me; no, she didn't take me at all."

Again Sir Lionel laughed, but more doubtfully.

"I would be monstrously obliged to you, madame," he said earnestly, "if you would tell me where I can purchase such a silver ribbon as this. I have a mind to try the fashion of it in a peruke. What does your ladyship think?"

Mr Stevens wore a green ribbon yesternight, but it didn't take me—green is hardly the mode."

"When I saw him," interrupted Mr Steward, "I said to him, 'First sign of decay,—grass growing on an empty house,' just like that I said it."

Both his hearers laughed painstakingly.

"Did he take you?" asked Sir Lionel.

"Oh, brainless fellow, Stevens," said Mr Steward scornfully, as he turned away to flash his wit in other quarters.

"Devilish queer fellows, these wits," murmured Sir Lionel. "Do you never find them a trifle wearisome, madame?"

"Is Mr Steward one of the wits?" asked Lady Margaret gravely.

"Oh, not absolutely," answered Sir Lionel generously. "He wears one of the best set cravats in town. He is a vastly modish fellow; I swear I don't see why all the company should find him so monstrously amusing."

"No!" asked Margaret, with a slow smile. "I protest I know no one in town at whom I can more easily laugh."

The approach of Viscount Bolingbroke soon eased her of her second cavalier. St John understood better than any man the art of monopoly. He presently led her away into the green shady path that bordered the end of the grounds under the fruit-covered walls. Such few promenaders as they met there soon left them to themselves.

"When does his Highness leave you, madame?" he asked abruptly, when they were alone.

"He talks of quitting us to-morrow," she answered nervously. It was even as she dreaded—he had approached the fatal subject.

St John was relieved at her answer; a day later and it had been too late. He had a mind to discover, if possible, the instigator of the intrigue, but doubted whether this girl could throw light on the matter.

"How have his affairs prospered?" he ventured.

"His Majesty does not discuss his affairs with me," answered Margaret haughtily.

"Nor you with me, madame, it would seem," he answered sadly. "Not even those affairs which must lie

nearest the heart of all who are made happy by your ladyship's notice."

"Affairs——?" questioned Margaret doubtfully.

"The affairs of love," murmured St John.

The Secretary had a beautiful voice, with the heart-stirring intonations of the skilled orator.

Margaret started; love was indeed a thought very near her heart.

"I have been very patient, madame, these three weary weeks."

Then she remembered the wager and laughed gladly to herself. Could she but keep to that subject he might forget to talk of the Prince.

"Oh, are you there?" she cried with a smile. "I take you, my lord. But fie on you, should love demand reward?"

"Not reward, madame, but remembrance."

"Surely the loss of £100 should keep your memory green."

"I reckon upon no such loss, madame," laughed the Secretary, smiling at her challenging eyes. "Women are not eternally cruel,—the gods have mercifully made them changeable creatures."

"Yet even a woman may preserve her resolution for twenty-four hours."

"Tis hardly to be feared, madame. Ah! surely you will not refuse me some little remembrance—remembrance of the secret you and I share, of the work we have done together for the Prince. What! you wear the white roses of the Stuarts—let but your remembrance be one little rose."

"No, no," she cried sharply. The roses he had kissed were sacred to her now.

St John looked at her quickly. Was it possible that she knew?

"If not a rose, madame, then perhaps some less fragile token. Your glove? But as a remembrance, madame, a remembrance of our prince."

But now the true love his words had recalled made her shrink from this shallow farce of love. How could she

give aught, even in play, to such a man?—she who had given all for ever to another.

"Enough, my lord," she said petulantly; "let us return to the lawns."

St John was puzzled at this sudden change,—he saw hopes of a gallant victory fading.

"Alas! madame, have I for ever lost your favour?" he pleaded.

"I have no favour for you, my lord," she answered bluntly.

The Secretary grew angry.

"No? madame," he asked slowly, "not even a token of gratitude for one to whom you owe reputation, peace, the safety of your friends? not a favour from the one who holds in his hand that which could bring you ruin?"

She stopped dead. "What do you mean, my lord?" she asked sharply.

"Do you know, madame, the true name and business of him whom you have harboured these three weeks?"

Her face grew suddenly white, in her ears rang the words of Lebrun. "What mercy would be shown to an impostor?" She clenched her hands desperately in her sudden terror.

"Ah! what do you know?" she muttered helplessly.

The Secretary himself knew very little, he was groping in a mist. He would have sworn the girl Tory—a very Jacobite devotee—yet she knew the intrigue against the Prince's friends, and had sheltered the intriguers. He could not understand it. But blind though he was, he felt the game was in his hands at last.

"I know everything, madame," he said gravely, "and I have saved you."

"Saved me!" she cried; "from what have you saved me?"

"From the misery of bringing ruin upon the Prince's cause. From more. What think you, madame, were the fate of one proved intriguing against her Majesty's favourite? The best she could hope for were the loss of her reputation; her friends might save her freedom, but at the expense of her good name. Do I deserve no gratitude for saving you from that, madame?"

"What have you done?" she asked breathlessly.

St John deliberately drew out his watch.

"It should be now in the doing, madame. There is a warrant out against this Mr Lebrun and his fellow. They will be arrested this afternoon at your house as spies, as common impostors—thieves—it matters not what—they will not come to trial."

"Not to trial," repeated Margaret stupidly.

"Above all things your name must be protected, the affair kept secret. The men who serve the warrant are in my trust."

"What then?"

St John hesitated. "It is to be expected these impostors may offer some resistance after their removal from your house," he continued slowly; "but the men have orders to hold them, dead or alive, and for the better avoidance of scandal, by preference—dead."

"Dead!"

"It's the only sure way to silence tongues, madame. Their papers will be seized and handed to me; by to-morrow they will be remembered but as two common housebreakers, who have imposed upon your ladyship as men of affairs sent by Sir Everard."

"Dead!" muttered the girl again. Her brain could take in but that one word. From the lawns beyond the high box-hedges came the ripple of light laughter, the soft whispers of gallantry, the merry notes of the violins; like the sound of the passing-bell breaking on the soft murmuring sunshine of summer, that word rang through the music of the gay voices and killed all the light of her heart. Then suddenly her brain cleared,—she turned on him fiercely.

"No, no!" she cried, "you shall not kill him."

St John raised his eyebrows. "What is to prevent it, madame?"

"Oh, I will!" she cried hoarsely,—"with my life, if need be."

He turned and looked at her. So here was the answer to the riddle. He laughed softly.—a woman's love-affair was ever a subject of vast amusement to Secretary St John.

She heard the laugh, and her eyes flashed hope.

"Ah!" she cried, "you are laughing; it was then a jest."

He shook his head. "A jest for him, madame? for me—perhaps."

She saw his meaning. "Oh, I must prevent it," she muttered desperately.

"It is too late, madame."

But she did not heed him.

"I must go to him," she murmured, pressing her hands to her head, striving to clear her brain. "My coach—no! that has driven back to town. But there are horses at the stables——only they are so busy here, and the affair must not be published. Ah! what——? The inn! They have horses at the inn." She turned towards the postern in the wall leading out into the meadows. "Go," she cried to St John, "fetch me a coach from the inn. Ah! quick, quick."

Again the Secretary smiled, this time at the innocence of the request.

"Pardon me, madame," he said ironically, "if I refuse."

She stared at him: in her desperation she had forgotten the reason he had for opposing her will.

"You refuse, sir!" she cried angrily; "then will I find others to do my bidding."

He caught her wrist as she turned to leave the path.

"Pardon me, madame," he said, in the same slow drawl, "if I prevent you."

The girl's face flushed crimson with passion.

"If you do not let me pass, sir, by heaven! I will scream for help."

"No, madame, you will not," he said calmly; "you will remember your reputation."

"My reputation!" she cried, with a sudden flash of scorn; "what is my reputation compared with a man's life?"

He looked into her eyes, and read there for the first time the reckless defiance of a woman, desperate in defence of the man she loves. The look taught him much. Secretary St John had not taken that into his calculations. On the instant he changed his plans.

"I beg your pardon, madame," he said gravely; "I have

done you a wrong. I did not know this man's safety was ought to you. It shall be as you wish,—I will go and fetch you the coach."

Coaches, he reflected, are easily delayed.

"I will go with you—it will save time," said Margaret.

He opened the postern door, and they left the garden unseen. St John could hardly keep pace with the girl as she ran across the meadows. The inn stood in a secluded lane, some hundred yards from the high road. The front of the house was deserted. The Secretary strode through the yard shouting for the grooms, while Lady Margaret, satisfied by this show of zeal, went upstairs at his request to await him in the coffee-room.

She opened the door of the room, and then stopped with that soft half-laughing cry only heard on the lips of a woman at sudden sight of the man she loves. For at the far end of the room, leaning dejectedly against the high chimney-piece, his head on his arms, stood Lebrun.

He turned quickly at the sound of her entrance, and in a moment she was in his arms.

"Ah! beloved!" she cried, clinging to him, "why are you here? Did you learn the danger?"

He tried to put her from him, tried to hold to his resolve, but beneath his struggle his heart leaped gladly to think the fates had brought her to him again, and even as he strove against her he vowed he would never let her go.

He soothed her gently. "There is no danger, dear. I am but going away."

She looked at him strangely. "Going away! Leaving me! Ah! then you do not love me?"

He laughed softly, kissing her hair.

"Not love you, sweet? Do I not so?"

"But you would leave me, without farewell?"

"Ah! child, I have been blind. I dreamed that having won your heart I had won all. I dreamed the world was but holding for us the best it has to give. I forgot, dear, that life is too short to be spent in waiting, and the world has grown too old to be changed at men's desires. I was blind."

"Then who has given you sight?" she asked mockingly.

"Drummond."

She laughed scornfully. "Men's counsels!" she said, with a little gesture of scorn. "Dear, my king! If the world be old, love is young and strong; if life be short, love is eternal. What further did Captain Drummond preach?"

"Margaret, you don't know what your life would be,—with me."

"And do you know what my life would be without you—alone?"

"Dear, you would forget."

"Would you forget?" she asked quickly.

"Not while I live, Margaret," he answered passionately. "But for you it is different; you will marry and——"

She broke from him angrily. "Are we women then shuttlecocks to be tossed from hand to hand? We are light enough, some of us, God knows—but not all so light as that."

"But your birth—your family?" he continued, arguing with himself more than with her.

She raised her head proudly. "And when have the women of our house feared to follow their husbands—if need be to the death?"

"That you should suffer——"

"Would you then have me fear suffering?" she asked scornfully.

Then she laid her hands in his. "Listen, dear," she said softly; "I think love must always bring some suffering. Love does not come many times to a woman, does not come to all women, I verily believe, but when it comes it brings her hour of choice—choice between life and death. She may hold to love and so live her life and suffer life's pain, or she may reject love and so gain the peace of insensibility. Only the choice is her own to make, and she can choose but once. Dear, I have chosen. Let me live my life, let me endure my suffering, only so I have your love."

He caught her in his arms. "Dear angel," he whispered, "even so I believe. Are you and I dreaming, or is all the world else bemazed?"

"What does it matter," she answered simply, "so only we dream together?"

"Then, God helping us, we will never awaken from our dream."

There was a knock at the door. The host entered to say the coach was ready, and the gentleman below wished to know if the lady would descend.

Margaret started to her feet.

"Oh! I had forgotten," she whispered quickly,—*"dear, there is danger. Viscount Bolingbroke has discovered all: he has sent men to the house to arrest you as—an impostor, —to kill you. I was even now setting out to warn you."*

"The Secretary!" cried Lebrun sharply. "Good heavens! he must be stopped at all hazards."

"Yes, or he will kill you."

He laughed lightly. "He must catch me first. No! but he will get first word to the Queen, and that is everything, —he can ruin us still. We must stop him, even if need be at the price of his own safety. Who is this man with you?"

"Why, the Secretary himself."

"St John!"

"Yes," she faltered; "he came to help me to set out—to warn you."

"Came to help!" he laughed scornfully. "Oh! most gallant Secretary!"

Then he turned to the host, who stood watching with interest their whispered colloquy. "Ask the gentleman below to wait upon the lady here."

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Bargain, if we cannot outwit him." He opened the door of an inner room. "Wait here while I speak with him," he urged. "Where the plague is Drummond?" he muttered petulantly, when she had withdrawn.

St John entered the room quickly, but came to pause in blank amazement at sight of Lebrun.

"We have sent for you, my lord," began Lebrun gravely, "to thank you in person for your great courtesy in offering to accompany this lady on her errand to frustrate your plans. We rejoice to be able to save you the inconvenience of the ride."

St John laughed quietly.

"We know each other, Monsieur Lebrun," he said bluntly; "we can drop the curtain on the tace. You think you have escaped? My word is as good at Kilburn as in St James's, I fancy. You will hand me over the papers you have gained by this masquerading, or prepare to take the consequences."

"My Lord Viscount, you may be very sure I should not have entered upon this—or masquerading had I not been from the beginning prepared to face the consequences," answered Lebrun calmly. "Pray call up your hounds."

St John hesitated. Drummond's absence worried him. He must get possession of the papers at all hazards; he could settle later with Lebrun. Meanwhile his wits worked quickly. He began to see chance of profit to himself from the affair. His own safety must first be secured, but he had hopes of encompassing that by first word to the Queen. But could he obtain possession of all the papers and silence Lebrun, then, not only would he be saved, but he would hold in his hand a weapon of defence against both Oxford and the favourite. The thought of holding Oxford in his power was too tempting to be resisted. But he saw he had a risky game to play, for forcible measures might well lead to the destruction of the papers, or, in event of failure, to his own undoing.

"Monsieur Lebrun," he said gravely, "I am unwilling to risk the publicity which your arrest would bring to this affair. I must, before all, save the lady whom you have imposed upon from scandal——"

"I have no doubt," interrupted Lebrun with his strange, quick smile, "that is your sole consideration."

St John continued, without noting the interruption, "If you will hand over to me the papers in your possession, signed by the Lord Treasurer, Mrs Masham—and——er——"

"Ever forgetful of self," murmured Lebrun admiringly.

"Exactly," answered St John. "By myself. We shall then save this lady's share in the affair from publicity, you will go free, and I am prepared to offer you a very handsome remuneration for your trouble in the transaction."

"You are ever generous, my lord," answered Lebrun gravely; "but though I have no personal objection to serving you, I have a great objection to changing horses while crossing a stream. In other words, I hold to the hand that pays me till the affair is closed."

"Then you refuse a peaceable settlement?"

"On such terms, I do."

"There are then three courses open to me, in neither of which it seems to me do you play a very enviable part. I can either arrest you openly and seize these papers; I can have you—er——"

"Removed," suggested Lebrun cheerfully; "that would surely also save the lady's reputation?"

"Or by warning Mrs Masham, I can prepare her Majesty for the reception of these papers, and, I doubt not, obtain pardon beforehand for our—er—indiscretion."

"And yet neither course appears to me a perfectly satisfactory solution for you," answered Lebrun thoughtfully. "You have already stated your—sole—objection to the first. The second may prove a trifle difficult of accomplishment. The third is entirely dependent for success upon the disposition of her Majesty, and she has certainly shown herself of late weeks sternly opposed to the Jacobite interests. Moreover, Mrs Masham's assertion of loyalty to the Stuart is couched in such terms as even her mistress is hardly likely to forgive."

This last was unexpected news. St John remembered suddenly that he knew nothing of the extent to which Mrs Masham was implicated. Women are notoriously foolish, he knew, and should her influence fail him he had little hope of pardon. Lebrun smiled at his crestfallen countenance.

"Then, perhaps, you will care to consider my offer," he continued. "Your own letter destroyed and no tales told, in return for a free pass and a silent tongue. What do you say, my lord?"

But St John was ambitious. The thought of holding Oxford in his power was too strong a temptation to be resisted; moreover, he knew that the present fall of the Treasurer and Mrs Masham, followed as he surmised by the

triumph of the Duchess of Marlborough, would inevitably bring about his ruin, even should his share in the intrigue pass undetected. He resolved on desperate measures.

"I think," he said slowly, "I prefer the second alternative. I do not see the difficulties you anticipate. It needs but to call up the grooms,—they know me here,—and I can undertake to silence belief in any wild accusations a desperate man may fling at his foes. I should soon have you safe in Newgate—which is an unhealthy climate. You see I am perfectly honest with you, Monsieur Lebrun."

"Perfectly, my lord; what I do not see is your reason for this honesty," said Lebrun faintly.

"You are so completely in my power," answered St John, with a smile. "Come, am I to have those papers?"

"Your own, with all the will in the world, if you will fulfil the conditions."

"All or none."

Lebrun made a gesture refusing further argument.

"Then I call the grooms."

"There still remains the hope they may hesitate to arrest—their Prince."

"Prince!" St John paused with his hand on the door-latch.

"I have played more difficult parts, and passed with shrewder critics."

"I will cry you impostor."

"Your word against my face."

"You are mad, man," cried St John scornfully.

"Then beware how you corner me," muttered Lebrun, between his teeth.

St John opened the door. "What's that?" he said sharply.

Loud on the silence came the sound of tramping feet, the first low, savage growl of an angry mob.

Lebrun sprang to the window. The lane before the inn was black with a shifting crowd of men, looking strangely dark and threatening in the waning light. In the front rank were some two dozen moderately sober citizens, smiths, porters, and the like, coffee-house politicians, a little more fanatical than the majority of their kind:

these for the present exercised some sort of control over their wilder companions. For the rest, the crowd was composed of drunken roysterers, wild half-starved youths, keen-eyed beggars, and unkempt women, the scum of the town, easily moved to a savage rage, willing to do anything for a sufficiency of ale, eager for any riot or disturbance so it might lead to loot. Of such, under different leaders, had been the rioters of 1708, when all the chapels in the town had been destroyed; of such came the disturbances in the spring of this same year, when rumours of anti-Jacobite riots had terrorised the town.

The two men had been so deeply engaged in their bargaining they had not noticed the approach of the mob, but others in the lower part of the house had been more alert. Though they were unaware of the object or possible destination of the crowd, the aspect was sufficiently threatening to set them to hurriedly barring doors and shuttering windows at its approach. The host valued his cellars, and saw at least small prospect of paying customers in his tumultuous visitors.

The crowd came to a halt before the inn, pushing and shouldering one another in the narrow lane. Baffled by the closed door, they broke into angry mutterings which presently rose into a savage growl.

A clear voice rose above the confusion.

"Come out, Simon Bond, come out and deliver up the man."

A window opened in the upper part of the house, and the innkeeper looked nervously out.

"Is't thee, Andrew Willis?" he said. "What do you want, man?"

"Open and let us enter," shouted Willis.

"Not I," answered Simon stoutly. "I like neither the size of your friends' mouths nor the cut of their coats."

"Are the two gentlemen from London still within?" shouted another voice.

"Ay; what would you with them?"

"You are harbouring treason," interposed Willis fiercely. "we would avenge the Queen's Majesty."

"Drink her health, more like," muttered Simon.

"Treason! Tut, tut, man, you were ever a talker, and that is aye thirsty work. Get back to your beds."

Again the crowd growled angrily, seeing themselves balked of access to the beer-barrels. Someone threw a stone, and a window smashed.

"Will you open to us?" shouted Willis furiously.

One or two link-boys followed the throng; the shifting light of the torches illumined the face of the leader—it was white and strained, the lips drawn thin above the teeth, the eyes glittering strangely. With such a look had men, two centuries earlier, lighted the stakes at Smithfield, and turned the screw of the rack, for the eyes were lighted with the fire of fanaticism, and the lips drawn back in the first thirst for blood.

Simon measured the crowd with his glance.

"You can stay where you are," he muttered sulkily; "I'll not open my doors to you."

"Then we will break them in," cried Willis hoarsely. "As God is above us, I'll spare neither man, woman, nor child that stands betwixt me and the man, James Stuart."

A wild shout from the mob asserted their agreement, but Lebrun waited to hear no more.

Pushing aside St John, who was staring amazedly down at the throng, he dashed to the door and down the stairway. In the hall he found Drummond leisurely pulling on his riding-boots. He snook him by the shoulder.

"For God's sake, Drummond!" he cried hoarsely, "keep them out! There are a hundred devils from London on our track. Will the door hold? Are the windows barred? Sapristi! They'll break in the door."

"Not they," answered Drummond calmly. "Joseph has charge of the defences." He pointed to the back of the hall, where Joseph, with that smile of tolerant contempt only seen to perfection on the face of the British soldier, was explaining the mechanism of an old blunderbuss to the least terrified in a group of grooms. "They won't pass Joseph. Besides," he added coolly, "what if they do?"

"If they do!" muttered Lebrun in a shaking voice. "Man alive! half of them are crazy, and the rest are drunk. What's to hold them? Christus! How they

howl!" he cried, shuddering, as another angry shout rose from the mob.

Drummond turned slowly, and looked up into his companion's white, twitching face.

"What's the matter with you, man?" he asked curiously; "are you afraid?"

"My God! yes," answered Lebrun hoarsely. "Drummond, she, Lady Margaret, is here!"

Drummond sprang to his feet. "Lady Margaret!" he muttered. He turned sharply to his servant—"Joseph, we must keep them out. You understand? At any cost. Mark me, you men," he added grimly to the grooms, "if the mob break in, you shall be the first to suffer. We must get her away," he muttered to Lebrun, as he turned to mount the stairs; "the door won't hold them long."

It was characteristic of the man that he never asked how she had come there. That which was least to be expected had happened, but he wasted no time in questions.

At the top of the stairway they encountered Simon. He looked dazed and terrified at what he had just learned concerning the nature of his guests. He stared at them, and bowed hurriedly to Lebrun. Drummond took him by the collar and wheeled him back into the room. "Which way does your brandy enter, friend Simon?" he asked sharply.

"Brandy?" gasped the bewildered man.

"Oh, we are no gaugers. Have you no hidden door by which forbidden fruits may enter—and depart, eh?"

"There is the little door from the cellar," answered Simon doubtfully. "It leads up outside the wall of the yard behind."

"That will do," answered Drummond decisively. "Where is Lady Margaret?"

Lebrun had already opened the door of the little room where he had bidden her wait. He found her trembling and terrified at the disturbance, but rigidly obeying his commands.

"Here's a crowd of fools in search of King James," he said lightly. He had already recovered his nerve under Drummond's leadership. "There will be some rough

jesting when they learn their mistake, and you must be out of it, sweet."

St John stepped from the shadow of the window. Drummond turned on him in amaze.

"You here!" he cried, and his face cleared. "Why, they will know you, my lord: go on the balcony and speak to them."

But here was one whom Drummond's brisk orders could not move to obedience.

"Know me! the devil they do. A precious sight too well, and hate me worse than Oxford, the pestilent Whigs. If they saw me they'd swear the Prince was behind me, and all London would know to-morrow I'd sheltered him."

Drummond eyed him impatiently.

"Go and explain to them who we are."

"Explain! What good are explanations to howling beasts? Besides," he muttered angrily, "if they did grasp your story, should I be in better odour with them?"

Lebrun looked at him and laughed softly. "It seems we've changed places, my lord," he said, "only my grooms are rather more in number than yours—and a trifle less meek. I think, Drummond, Viscount Bolingbroke will be more serviceable as a squire of dames. Let him conduct Lady Margaret back whence she came."

"Right," agreed Drummond: "take her out through the cellar and across the fields. Take a man with you to carry word to the watch to come and scatter this rabble."

"The brutes are all round the house," objected St John.

"Then we will bring them to the front."

"How can you hold them there while we get away?"

Drummond looked across at Lebrun.

"Gad! We'll show them James Stuart," he answered, with a laugh.

"Come, madame," said the Secretary, satisfied.

"Must I leave you?" asked the girl, clinging to Lebrun.

"You must, but you shall come to me again," he answered tenderly.

"I have your word?"

"The word of your lover."

He kissed her before them all. She drooped from his

arms and turned to accompany St John. At the door she paused, and turned to Drummond—

"You will send me word of him?" she pleaded. Then she followed the Secretary.

They slipped out into the fields unseen. The mob had collected again in front of the house, called back there by renewed shouts of excitement denoting some unexpected occurrence. In five minutes the fugitives were safe in the garden.

They had been absent half an hour. All the guests were indoors, for the dancing had commenced. Many eyebrows were raised when the couple entered from the twilight garden. The contrast between the two scenes was overwhelming—between this gay throng of revellers in the brightly-lighted rooms, and that wild crowd in the darkness before the inn. Lady Margaret turned to St John, when she reached her aunt's side.

"Go, bring me news of him," she whispered.

St John was not accustomed to orders from women, however fair; nevertheless he turned at once to do her bidding. But at the door he paused and changed his mind. He sent for his groom.

"Jacob, there are two gentlemen at the inn below there who must not escape me," he explained rapidly. "You will go there at once and you will watch them. There is a crowd outside, but the watch is sent for and they will soon be dispersed. Then enter the house. If these gentlemen show signs of departing, send me instant word of it, and prevent them at all costs. Mind, I must not miss them."

The man was well used to such commands; he went about his duty without further question.

St John waited a little while in the garden and then returned to Lady Margaret. He forgot nothing, not even the little affair of his wager.

"The crowd has dispersed and all are safe, madame," he whispered. "Monsieur Lebrun returns to London, and will await you there."

Lady Margaret never dreamed but that Lebrun had clinched his bargain with St John. She supposed there

was no more to fear in that quarter, since she had seen her lover's high-handed manner towards the Secretary. She had a heart that never imagined treachery.

"Ah! you are monstrous kind," she cried gratefully, when he brought her this welcome news.

"May I then claim this dance for my reward?" he asked humbly.

She yielded him her hand and he led her to the dance.

Many a day did men talk of that minuet and smile; many an epigram did the wits devise to describe it,—*"The terpsichorean poetry of wooing,"* said one; a second spoke of *"Cupid's bows,"* and was deeply aggrieved when none understood his play upon words. Mr Stuart claimed much acclamation for his lines—

"Time was when Cupid's arrows lurked alone in beauty's glance,
But now the cunning god conceals his darts within the dance;
Each curtesy hides a barbed shaft, each turn a lover's vow,
Fans wave caress and hearts lie crushed beneath a gallant's bow."

But the palm was universally adjudged to Monsieur Décassé for his concise *"Minuet au Cœur."* For by some strange freak of fortune six of Lord Wildmore's beauties had vouchsafed to give their hands to their respective suitors for this same dance. Seeing this, all others stood aside, leaving these twelve to dance alone before the hundred eyes that watched them.

Judge now, oh ye gods! how then those wooers poured their souls into the dance. Oh, what a sweet adoration spoke in their bows! How they gave their hands as indeed their hearts went with them! With what a piteous pleading glance they knelt at their ladies' feet! 'Twas the very passion of silent wooing.

And they, the valiant Fair! Their hands but touched the hands of those who wooed, as drawing nearer but to fling aside. Their eyes and smiles shot challenge to the foe, their fans waved bold defiance, and their curtsies, low, sweeping to the ground, mocked the humility of surrender. So they danced, and all the company looked on and smiled to see the play—all save one: for Lady Sybilla Seaton kept her house, and Sir Harry Ford stood aside and watched

with scornful eye and curling lip the efforts of the men, deeming he could have far surpassed them, had but his fair Sybilla been at hand.

Many who noted Lady Margaret and her partner as they took their places for that famous dance thought St John already holder of his prize. For the lady's eyes were aglow and her face bright with happiness, and, despite the Secretary's pleading looks, his eyes spoke triumph, for now assuredly he held her in his power: if gratitude could not win her favour he had threats that should extort it,—the fortress that will not surrender must be stormed.

But the night was still young; there was time for comedy before the serious game began. Let mobs howl and let men intrigue, for himself he attended to the affair of the moment; he danced this "Minuet au Cœur" with all his heart in his eyes, and won the universal acclamations of the onlookers. Truly St John was above all things—thorough!

IX.

When Lady Margaret had departed under the Secretary's escort, Lebrun and Drummond turned and faced each other anxiously.

"Can we hold them?" asked Lebrun.

"Light the candles."

The mob were clamouring round the house, hurling stones at the unprotected windows. The sudden blaze of light brought them back to the front.

"Now is the time," said Drummond briefly, pushing open the window on to the balcony.

"Once more to play the Prince," cried Lebrun with an exultant laugh, as he stepped into the glare of light.

A moment the mob stood silent, staring up at him. Then they broke into a savage howl.

"Gad, how they hate me!" muttered Lebrun, smiling down on them. He was once more heart and soul in his part.

Andrew Willis was shouting and gesticulating frantically below, trying vainly to make his eloquence heard above

the tumult: "Tyrant! Man of blood! Popish brat!" were among the disjointed sentences that floated up to the balcony.

Lebrun stepped to the front of the balcony, and, leaning over, laughed down at the excited figures below. He held up his hand and a sudden silence fell upon the noisy throng.

"Well, gentlemen," he said cheerfully, "here I am. What do you want with me?"

"Traitor! Tyrant! We want your blood," howled Willis.

"My blood? Gad, friends!" laughed Lebrun, "I am sorry, but I've none to spare. Wouldn't good red wine suit your stomachs better?"

A cheer rose from the outskirts of the crowd, and some hustling to reach the door ensued. But the front ranks stood stolid and held their ground.

Lebrun eyed them quickly. "Well! And what more do you want with me?" he asked.

"No more than we mean to take," shouted Willis, infuriated by the trimming of the crowd behind. "We'll have your blood as we had your grandfather's, as we would have had your father's, as we will have the blood of every cursed Stuart spawn that sets foot on English soil." He snatched a stone and aimed it weakly at Lebrun: it fell far short. "At him, men!" he shouted wildly. "Break in the door! Pelt the tyrant to death!"

But the crowd hesitated. They looked up at Lebrun as he eyed them calmly, they noted his steady glance and the slow cynical smile that played about his lips, and they paused. For this was a Prince, a man of the Blood Royal, descendant of a hundred kings, and despite their sturdy Whiggism, despite their stubborn Protestantism, despite all the teachings of their fanatic leader, deep in their hearts still lingered traces of that undying loyalty to the true heads of the nation, that old belief in the sacredness of the Royal Person. Moreover, to some of them as they watched this man quietly standing above them, facing unmoved their tumultuous threats, it seemed that here indeed was a leader to follow, a king whom any man might stoop to serve.

"Bless his bonny face!" cried an old woman at the back of the crowd. "'Tis King Charlie come back to us again." She gave a shrill tipsy cheer, and the ragamuffins round her laughed.

But Lebrun cared little for the noisier members of the crowd,—he had eyes only for the sober little knot of men below him, hesitating before the fanatic exhortations of their leader.

"Why, here's a strange thing!" he continued gaily. "You follow me from London, and you call me out with such a pestilent confusion of howls as never man heard before outside of a show. And when I do come out to you, you've not even a rational tongue to tell me what you want with me."

Again the wilder section of the rioters laughed. They saw good prospect of reward for labour, of drink without the trouble of fighting for it. They were quickly lapsing into the easy humour of the hopeful toper, and began to hustle the sturdy phalanx of sober men who stood round the door.

Lebrun leaned farther over the rail.

"Come!" he said to the doubtful faces before him. "Plain words are best. What do you come here for? Do you want my life? It will do you plaguey little good, my men, but you are welcome to try to come and take it."

"Why do you let him talk?" cried Willis frantically. "Break down the door."

But the men stood silent, looking into the steady eyes above them.

"Egad, Drummond!" muttered Lebrun, "if I were indeed Jamie Stuart, I'd be crowned in London to-morrow."

Willis looked wildly at his followers and saw that their allegiance was weakening. With a savage scowl he turned away and slipped through the crowd.

"Come up and kill me if you like," continued Lebrun imperturbably. "and—if you can. But crowns will be broke before mine, and I don't see what you will gain by that. Regicide gives a man a poor appetite for his supper, and unless the women change even more than the wits

would have us believe, that man will have but a poor night's rest who goes home and tells his wife he has killed his Prince."

Again the roisterers laughed—Lebrun had them well on his side at last. Willis had reached the edge of the crowd by now. He stood at the elbow of a big dark-faced man in long cloak and slouch hat, one of those adventurers, knights of the road, half-hearted highwaymen, who haunted the less frequented roads in the neighbourhood of town, and extorted a scanty toll from timorous passengers.

"I can tell you a pleasanter way of passing a summer evening than putting your necks in the halter by killing your Prince," cried Lebrun cheerily, waving his arm to the more noisy of his drunken opponents. "Friend Simon here shall broach two of his best out in the road there, and we'll have tankards of ale for all loyal folk who will drink to the health of King James."

The crowd yelled with delight. Willis was coaxing and wheedling at the highwayman's elbow—"Five crowns! Ten crowns! and not a soul to know of it. Only the loan for five minutes," he urged.

"As for you——" continued Lebrun, leaning over the rails. "You men with brains as well as mouths. Choose four good men to come up and talk over your grievances, while the rest drink below to our better understanding. What say you?"

Willis had prevailed. He was creeping back quickly through the crowd.

"Well! what say you?" urged Lebrun.

"'Tis only fair-play and a fair offer," said a sturdy grocer, their leader under Willis, "and thank your Royal Majesty."

Lebrun raised himself up to his full height exultingly, and looked over the crowd.

"God save King James!" cried some one, and a wild cheer followed the cry.

The sharp crack of a pistol shot echoed the shout. Lebrun half swung round with a look of surprise, and flung up his arm.

"Oh! the fools!" he muttered, "the blessed fools!"

He fell back into Drummond's arms.

There was a minute of intense silence, then wildest confusion. The mob, who thus saw themselves balked of their promised drink, howled with rage and made a fierce rush to reach the man who had fired the fatal shot. The Whigs faced about to defend themselves, but half-heartedly: they were frightened, as the first sight of a sudden death-blow always frightens civilisation. They were shocked by the unexpected brutality of the attack on the defenceless man. The mob flung stones and brandished sticks, hustling the Whigs back against the inn, shouting savage threats. Drummond, as he dragged Lebrun's tall form back into the lighted room, looked down on the struggle below with a grim smile.

Suddenly another sound rose above the confusion, the jingle of harness and tramp of horses' hoofs. St John's messenger had met a mounted patrol of the watch, riding the road in search of highwaymen and other such disturbers of the peace, and they had turned aside on hearing of the rioters. There were many among that crowd with ears quickened to mark the approach of the guardians of the law. Before the watch turned into the lane the mob had broken and scattered. They found only a few of Willis's immediate supporters, too dazed to give any satisfactory account of the disturbances, and the old man himself, half mad with exaltation, shouting wildly of the blessed shot that had rid England of her greatest foe.

Five minutes later, after binding over Simon (who, fearing further trouble, discreetly suppressed all mention of his guests) to appear upon the morrow, the watch rode on with Willis in custody, and the deep silence of evening brooded over the inn.

Among his many useful accomplishments Joseph possessed some knowledge of chirurgery. With Drummond's help he roughly probed Lebrun's wound, which was in the shoulder, and extracted the bullet. Joseph was proud of his work, and felt it almost as a personal grievance when his patient winced and cursed under his rough handling.

Drummond's ministrations were more gentle. When the wound was dressed, he tried to get the man to bed,

but Lebrun refused fretfully to leave the sofa, and Drummond, reading the hope in his heart, pillowed himself there with the precious papers safe in his keeping, and went off to fulfill his lady's last charge.

He knew but one way of sending her a message in the midst of society without exciting society's untoward curiosity, and as he prepared it, he smiled grimly and a little wistfully over the only act of gallantry he had ever performed.

So it befell when Lady Margaret came out of the supper room, leaning on the arm of Mr Steward, a servant handed her a clumsily tied bouquet of white roses. He knew nothing whence it came, but had been sidened by a man at the gate to give it to her. It was well her partner was too interested in his own appearance and witticism to be observant, or he would have been amazed at the light in his fair companion's eyes when she received this simple offering.

In a moment, with the quickness of accustomed fingers she had found the note hidden in the flowers, and read it (as she had read many others) unseen, despite the gaze of a hundred eyes. Her face blanched at the lines:

"He is still here—wounded slightly. The crowd is dispersed."

A sudden fear chilled her, but neither her courage nor her self-control failed her. Bidding the servant at once call her coach, which had been for some time in attendance, she dismissed her cavalier and turned in search of Miss Cochrane.

Viscount Bolingbroke was with her aunt, waiting for opportunity to take possession of the niece and achieve his wager. The girl's eyes flashed angrily at sight of him, for she knew now that he had deceived her; but she dared not risk further danger to Lebrun by charging him with the fact.

Every moment's delay was an agony, but she held herself firmly in check, patiently combating her hostess's entreaties not to depart so early. Miss Cochrane supported her in her resolution to go home—the worthy lady ever loved her rest. St John's persistence was the more difficult to silence—the poor man was desperate at seeing his

hopes of success so suddenly and unaccountably snatched away; but he could not openly prevent her, and she gave him no opportunity for whispered entreaty or threat.

After five minutes of misery her final farewells were said, and she and her aunt drove away.

Ten yards from the door she stopped the coach.

"Drive back to the Inn," she cried, "quickly."

"Margaret, what is the matter?" cried Miss Cochrane, amazed.

"Oh! Auntie, he is there—wounded—dying maybe," she moaned.

"He? Whom do you mean, child?"

"Monsieur Lebrun."

"The king?"

"No, no, he is not the king, it was a mistake—an intrigue."

"Not the king!" gasped the bewildered lady.

"No, and never was," answered the girl confusedly. "He is only Monsieur Lebrun,—and—I love him."

"An impostor!"

The coach drew up before the door of the Inn. Margaret sprang out and ran up the staircase, followed by her bewildered aunt.

Lebrun was lying back, white and weary, on the sofa. The girl fell by his side and burst into tears.

"Ah! they—you—Ah! my dear, you are safe?" she sobbed.

Lebrun put his arm about her.

"Come, sweet, there's no need for tears," he laughed reassuringly. "It is but a scratch in the shoulder."

"Margaret!" interrupted Miss Cochrane, in a tone of cold anger. "Is it too much to ask to have this gentleman presented to me?"

The girl looked up bewildered. "It is Monsieur Lebrun," she said simply.

Lebrun turned to Miss Cochrane with a smile.

"I cannot hope for your forgiveness, madame, though I would crave it, since your niece has done me the honour to bestow on me her hand."

"Indeed," answered Miss Cochrane drily, "I am vastly

interested to hear it. And do you then propose to drag Lady Margaret down to the kennel from whence you came? You are perhaps not aware that she does not come into her inheritance until she is twenty-five, six years hence. Moreover, her guardian's consent to her marriage is a condition of her inheriting her fortune."

Margaret's eyes flashed. "What do I care for my fortune?" she cried.

"Less than Monsieur Lebrun, I doubt not," answered her aunt grimly.

But Margaret turned to Lebrun with a face full of trust.

"I care naught for my inheritance," she said again. "I will marry him to-morrow, or I will wait for him forever. Auntie, I love him so!"

Miss Cochrane's face grew softer.

"Child," she said gently, "you do not know what you promise. You do not know what such waiting is. How the long years drag on! How hope wakens afresh each spring, to die again in the winter! How at length in despair you kill hope, but its spirit still haunts your peace, and you wait on, seeing the semblance of hope only in its disappointment. My Peggy, forty years ago I promised to wait, even as you have done; I am waiting still."

Margaret rose and crossed to her aunt's side.

"And if it were to come over again, auntie?" she asked softly.

A moment they stood in silence, then a strange little smile broke over the elder lady's face, her eyes glistened.

"Heaven have pity upon me, Peggy," she said, "I should do it again."

Then she recollected herself quickly. "But how is this possible, child?" she cried. "Do you not see the man is an impostor, a fellow who enters the house in disguise to win the heart of an heiress—'tis a most common scoundrel."

"Oh, no, auntie!" interposed the girl, "you mistake. That was an accident. He did not come for me. The intrigue was political."

Miss Cochrane's face grew suddenly white and her lips set.

"Political!" she cried sharply. "An intrigue of the Whigs?"

"Yes—to win certain papers—signatures—" answered the girl, hesitating; "I do not quite understand——"

"But I understand," cried the elder lady, with a sudden flash of insight. "Heaven help me! What have I done? They hold in their hands that which will ruin Abigail Masham—Oxford—St John himself—all the king's most powerful friends. And it is I—I—who have helped them to it!" She stood thunderstruck at the horror of the thought.

"You will understand, madame," said Lebrun gently, "that when I undertook the affair I had never seen Lady Margaret. And she knew nothing of the matter—until to-day. She took me indeed for James Stuart."

Miss Cochrane paid no heed to his explanations.

"Where are these papers?" she asked sharply.

"Safe in my keeping, madame," answered Lebrun.

"You must destroy them here and now," said Miss Cochrane firmly.

"I regret that is impossible, madame."

"Impossible?"

"They are not my property. I have pledged my honour to preserve them."

Miss Cochrane looked round desperately; her eyes rested on her niece.

"These papers must be destroyed, Margaret," she said.

"I suppose the man will do what you ask of him."

"Lady Margaret will not ask of me that which is inconsistent with my honour," said Lebrun, and the girl stood silent.

Then Miss Cochrane played her last trump—the hand of her niece.

"Hearken to me, man," she began rapidly, "your fate is in my hands,—your fate and the girl's. I can do as I choose with this child's uncle; she shall marry you next month if she chooses, and the estate in Scotland shall be yours. I do not go back on my word. Those papers are my price."

"Madame," answered Lebrun firmly, "I have pledged

my honour to deliver these papers safely. What you suggest is impossible."

"You understand, if you refuse you lose the girl," she said harshly. "I'll keep her close. Ah! I'll warrant there will be no abduction."

Lebrun moved his wounded shoulder uneasily.

"I cannot help it, madame," he said wearily. "I trust to your kindness not to vent my sins upon Lady Margaret, but—— Ah! madame, you will not be hard with her," he broke off to plead.

Miss Cochrane heard him unmoved: her honour, her friend's safety, were at stake, even as was his honour and his love.

"Destroy the papers and the girl's yours," she said bluntly. "Refuse, and I carry her off to town, and you shall never set eyes on her again. Never, I vow. You talk of waiting. Tut! There are ways of breaking a girl's spirit even in these degenerate days—thank Heaven! I'll marry the wench within a year to a shrewder guardian than I have been."

"Ah! no, no," cried the girl, shrinking back.

Lebrun flung his arm across his eyes and groaned.

"Ah! madame, won't you have pity on us?" he said. "What you ask is impossible."

"It is the price of the girl," she said sharply.

He held out his hand to Margaret and drew her towards him.

"Margaret! — beloved! — you understand me?" he pleaded. "You would not have me sell my honour, even for your happiness?"

"Not if it be so indeed," she answered slowly. "But—— but—— Ah! my dear, is it indeed impossible? Is there no way?" She turned to Drummond. "Is it indeed as he thinks?" she asked desperately. "Is his honour so pledged?"

Drummond crossed slowly to Lebrun's side, and stooping, drew from beneath his pillow the packet of papers. The others watched him in silence.

He stood for a minute with the papers in his hand, gazing through the open window, his eyes fixed on the

swinging sign, where the painted features of the Duke of Marlborough gleamed in the strong moonlight. Then he turned to Margaret.

"Monsieur Lebrun is right, madame," he said gently; "he has given his word to his mistress, in the event of obtaining these papers, to deliver them safely to her, and in breaking his word he would dishonour himself. He must not be so dishonoured now, for from henceforth his honour is—yours."

He paused. Once more he turned and looked at the painted face on the sign-board, then with a sudden movement he thrust the papers into the blaze of the candles.

Lebrun made an effort to rise, but Drummond held him back, and the letters burned slowly away into flaky blackness. Drummond dropped the last fragment into the fireplace.

"My honour is my own," he said softly, and turned away.

Margaret crossed to his side and laid her hand on his arm. "Twice you have saved me," she said softly. But she added no word of thanks,—what thanks could a woman give for such a sacrifice? Only he looked into her eyes, and he knew she understood.

Miss Cochrane broke the silence.

"That affair is closed," she said cheerfully. "Captain Drummond, I should be obliged if you would see if my servants are in waiting; we must take Monsieur Lebrun home. I think he can bear the drive, and he will be safer there than here. You will return with us, Captain Drummond?"

"I am very grateful to you, madame, but I must ride to-night in the opposite direction—to make my report. I must bid you farewell now."

"May fortune go with you," said Miss Cochrane gently.

But the other two bade him farewell in silence, the silence which says more than words.

Captain Drummond had scarce left the room when Viscount Bolingbroke was announced. He had set spies to watch the inn lest his quarry should escape, and re-

turned now to see what terms he could make before closing in his net. For he desired the possession of the papers rather than their destruction.

He had seen Lady Margaret drive off with her aunt. His amazement now, at finding her with Lebrun, robbed him of his customary astuteness.

"A most unexpected pleasure," he stammered, as Margaret advanced to meet him.

The girl smiled pleasantly. "Have you brought your grooms, sir, for the arrest of this gentleman?" she asked scornfully. "I hope their number is sufficient: he can still make use of one arm."

"Gad! madame, it is because the fellow is wounded, and because your ladyship takes so deep an interest in his safety," he added coolly, "that I am here in person to save him, if possible, from the gallows."

"Monsieur Lebrun should be vastly obliged to your lordship," answered Margaret calmly. "Is it permitted, since this is an age of commerce, to ask your price?"

"Monsieur Lebrun will hand over to me the papers in his possession, papers compromising certain people of importance. In return——"

"Well, my lord, what will you promise in return for such papers?"

Bolingbroke eyed her shrewdly; her calm assent put him off his guard.

"Well, my lord," she repeated impatiently.

St John glanced round the room.

"I will promise your ladyship that which is valued above gold or precious stones—a silent tongue."

Margaret laughed softly.

"It is enough, my lord," she said. "You will find the ashes of the papers you require lying on the hearth. I trust you will content yourself with those; we have no more to give you."

St John stared at her smiling eyes, then turned to the couch where Lebrun lay laughing at his discomfiture.

"And how the devil am I to be sure those are what I seek?" he cried, pointing to the ashes. "How am I to be sure the right papers are destroyed?"

"The safety of your own head will assure you," said Lebrun drily.

But Miss Cochrane stepped forward with quiet dignity.

"You may be assured, Viscount Bolingbroke, that were such papers not destroyed, my niece would not be here with this gentleman. You know me well, my lord, and you know how I treat my enemies."

But St John was very angry. "S'blood!" he cried, "you women are so easily hoodwinked. I will arrest the fellow and make sure."

Miss Cochrane moved to Lebrun's side and faced the angry Secretary.

"If you dare, my lord, to lay a finger on this gentleman, my guest, and the betrothed of Lady Margaret Beauchamp, by Heaven! you shall answer for it with your office. Mrs Masham, Lord Oxford, are my very good friends; they owe me a debt of gratitude for this night's work,—though more by chance than skill," she added drily. "I think, my lord, you will do well to let the matter rest."

St John stood hesitating, sulkily defiant. It was Lady Margaret who won the day, who changed his surly defiance into a gallant submission. She knew well that a wise man will not grudge his baffled foe a semblance of success; she understood also what balm to a defeated spirit lies in the secret belief that his is the moral victory.

With a shy smile she drew one of the roses from her bosom and crossed to his side.

"You have us in your power, my lord," she said softly. "But this gentleman's safety is very dear to me, and surely Viscount Bolingbroke is not one to mock at love! May a woman entreat? For the past three weeks, my lord, you have taught me to believe that you attached some—er—value to the winning of a poor token of my favour. Surely, then, you are too gallant to refuse me this gentleman's freedom in exchange for my rose?" Seeing him still doubtful, she added smiling, with a thought of his wager, "You may rest assured, sir, that Lady Margaret Beauchamp is not one to deny her gift."

St John recognised that the game was over,—no good could come of further persistence. He gladly welcomed

this chance of a gallant retreat, and at least the incident had won him £100.

He bowed humbly as he took the rose.

"Madame," he cried gallantly,—and who so gallant as he?—"I doubt not this gentleman will agree with me that a man's life is but a poor exchange for such a precious token."

Margaret smiled and blushed; but Lebrun moved impatiently on his sofa and scowled after the departing Secretary.

So Viscount Bolingbroke did not disappoint his confident supporters, and Lady Margaret's white rose joined his collection of trophies. And presently the gossips found much food for talk in the sudden wedding of her ladyship to an unknown gentleman, and in her subsequent retirement to her estate in the North.

But Lady Margaret had little thought to spare for the gossips as she drove home in her coach that evening, with the triumph of victory in her heart and the moonlight illumining the face of the man she loved.

A man passed them in the narrow street whistling "The king shall enjoy his own again." The eyes of the two met and smiled, and the girl whispered softly as she slipped her hand into his:

"The king shall enjoy his own—for ever."

On the moonlit road to St Albans a man was riding slowly, his face set steadily forward. Crushed tightly in his hand he held a withered white rose. He had sacrificed his career for his Leader, he had given his honour for his love. He rode out into the night—alone.

CHAPTER III.

THE QUIPS AND CRANKS OF DAN CUPID.

I.

It was very late, even for the revellers of the "Gamecock Club" at "White's Coffee-house." The tired servants were creeping about the room removing empty glasses and picking up cards, furtively beginning preparations for the welcome closing hour. Play was almost over for the evening, yet the members showed no intention of leaving their club; they stood about in groups or sat before the empty tables idly shuffling the cards. The usual stream of gossip, the political chat, the give-and-take of wagers had ceased; an expectant hush brooded over the room. Occasionally a glass clinked, otherwise silence reigned everywhere save at one table, where the soft fall of the cards and the low-voiced call of the stakes betokened that play was still in progress.

Towards this table all eyes were turned; but the two men, intent on their game, were oblivious of the close scrutiny to which they were subjected.

Silent they sat save when murmuring their stakes, almost motionless save when playing their cards, their faces as rigid as their pose. Neither face showed the slightest trace of triumph or despair, only the pile of notes on one side of the table betokened towards which of the gamblers Fortune extended her sceptre.

Thus had they sat every evening for a week, and to-night all knew that the end was near. For Mr Soames' run of

luck had been almost phenomenal, and to play as Sir Antony Esdaile had played, staking higher and higher as Fortune proved more obdurate, spelt certain ruin unless the sudden change of luck for which he waited should come within a few more deals.

So the members postponed their departure, and sat about in groups waiting for the closing scene. High play was certainly no exception at "White's," but even among these hardened gamblers a man did not ruin himself every day; there was always a certain excitement as to how he would conduct himself after the fatal deal, a certain interest to hear with what reckless jest or clever quip he would seek to carry off his defeat. Occasionally a ruined man lost his head, cursed his luck, and slandered his opponent; that was distinctly interesting. More frequently he lost control of his face, though restraining his tongue; tried to laugh with twitching lips and despairing eyes, seeking to disguise defeat under a jaunty swagger, with desperation writ large upon his features. But whether grave or gay, noisy or quiet, a ruined man was always a subject well worth observation and comment, for opinions differed as to the most suitable behaviour for a gentleman under the circumstances, and in those days when a man's dress and a man's manners were more severely criticised than perhaps at any other date, it behoved everyone to take advantage of every occasion for studying the most polite and most gallant mode of facing ruin.

And in addition to this desire to see how Sir Antony Esdaile, one of the most noted of the Macaronis, would behave in adverse fortune, the members of the "Gamecock Club" had yet a second interest in the final result of that evening's play; for the wager-book had filled rapidly during the week with bets concerning the ultimate success or ruin of the two gamblers, and scarcely a man there, though only spectator of the game, but stood to lose or win heavily according to the fall of the cards.

So they sat round silently, keenly scrutinising the impassive faces of the players, waiting for the end.

The end came sooner than they expected, for, as the clock struck three, Sir Antony, moved by some gambler's

freak to catch the omen of the lucky hour, trebled his stake (already one-half his remaining fortune), trebled it—and lost.

There was a moment's dead silence. Then Esdaile wrote his last I.O.U., handed it to his opponent, and rose from the table.

"That's enough for to-night, Soames; it's devilish late," he said quietly, as he had said at the close of play every night for the past week. He gave a quick glance round the room at the interested faces of his companions, and for a moment his lips curved into a cynical smile. He called for his hat and coat in his customary drawling voice, not even cursing the servant who hastened to bring it, and took his departure exactly as though nothing unusual had occurred.

The members of the "Gamecock" were disappointed. They had expected something better—something a trifle more spicy from a noted Macaroni like Antony Esdaile; they had at least hoped for a humorous remark, or a touch more of recklessness. This was distinctly tame. They were inclined to think their friend not so hardly hit as (in justice to human nature, it must be reluctantly confessed) they had hoped. But old Sir Jacob Clarke shook his head scornfully at the suggestion. He had marked the fact that for the first time in his history Antony Esdaile had gone abroad without first pausing before the mirror to straighten his cravat and give his hat the customary cock. Such an omission on the part of such a dandy could betoken nothing but ruin, utter and absolute ruin.

When Sir Jacob Clarke had delivered this opinion his hearers became more content, more inclined to be lenient in their judgment; nay, further, they even found some matter of interest in this exceedingly tame manner of facing defeat. Esdaile's behaviour was discussed again with renewed vigour. The certainty of his ruin freed him from the charge of insensibility; before a day had passed his unmoved mien had won many admirers; by the end of the week it had been pronounced by no less a person than Lord Petre himself as the only tolerable

behaviour for any gentleman who might be so unfortunate as to find himself in the same circumstances.

One other member of the "Gamecock Club" beside Sir Jacob Clarke had noted Antony Esdaile's significant omission. This was his intimate friend, Charles, Duke of Southwark, and he angured so seriously from it that he instantly called for his coat and followed his friend home, though not a little doubtful of the manner of his reception.

He found Esdaile seated in his shirt-sleeves before an unfilled glass, plunged in a reverie. Such a startling departure from the normal so amazed the Duke that he looked round hurriedly for the pistol which he fully expected to see ready at hand, and racked his brains for the most powerful arguments to dissuade his friend from the rash act which it would appear he must be contemplating.

Antony nodded a welcome to his friend, and motioned to him to help himself to wine. He took no further notice of his presence, but relapsed into his former reverie, and the Duke, with a resigned groan, settled himself down to an all-night sitting.

An hour passed in silence, while the Duke emptied the bottle and stared gloomily at his host. Then Esdaile threw up his head with an air of determination and rose to his feet.

"What a devilish fool a man can be!" he exclaimed, with a cynical laugh.

The Duke took this as permission to broach the subject first in the thoughts of both, and enquired the extent of the disaster.

"I'm in up to my last crown," answered Esdaile briefly.

The Duke bent his head low and examined with minute care the buttons on his sleeve.

"Don't go to the Jews, Antony," he stammered nervously. "I swear I'll charge you a fair interest."

Sir Antony shot a quick look of surprise at the speaker, then stretched out his hand in quiet token of gratitude for the offer of the loan.

"Thanks," he said gravely, "there will be no need to borrow."

He turned and looked round the room with a quick sigh.

"We've had some rare nights here, Charlie," he said regretfully. "That evening we roasted Harry about the little oyster-girl—do you remember? And the night we matched Stewart and Peter Wildmore—rare nights! And here it ends. Lord! what a fool I've been."

The Duke sprang to his feet and clutched his friend's arm earnestly.

"Don't do it, Tony," he cried desperately. "We can't spare you, man. Anything but that! By gad! I'll—I'll tie you up as a raving maniac if you attempt it."

Esdaile turned and stared at him in amazement.

"Why, Charlie, what's all this? Why the plague should I not do it? What else remains? Besides, thousands do the same every day and survive."

"Survive!" gasped the Duke.

Esdaile eyed him with increasing astonishment. Then he followed the direction of his gaze, and seeing it fixed upon his pistol-box he understood.

"Oh, those!" he cried, with a short laugh. "No, my friend, I don't intend to turn marksman yet. There's another way to escape bankruptcy. I shall try it first."

"What in the devil's name do you mean to do?"

"Why, marry, of course," answered Esdaile calmly.

The Duke gasped; his face showed but little sign of relief.

"Marry!" he cried. "Great heavens! Whom?"

Esdaile shrugged his shoulders.

"What do I care? Any woman, so she be rich enough."

The Duke drank off another glass to steady his brain. Then he turned seriously to his friend.

"You'd be a fool, Tony, to saddle yourself with a wife. Were she as rich as Cræsus it wouldn't be worth it. You of all men! Why, great Jove! you'd hate the sight of her at the end of a week."

Esdaile took a pinch of snuff, and gazed meditatively at the fair medallion inside the lid.

"I wonder——" he said thoughtfully, "I wonder——"

The Duke moved impatiently.

"It's a fool's notion," he said again.

Esdaile shut his snuff-box briskly. "Not at all," he said; "it is the one thing to be done. I must have money; life is useless without it. With it—even a wife will be a minor encumbrance."

"Bah!" cried the Duke scornfully. Then he asked curiously, "Have you your eye on any woman?"

Esdaile hesitated. "Hornycold's heiress should have a splendid dower," he said thoughtfully. "She has a passable figure, and is too young to be exacting. I think she will pass, and her aunt will jump at the match."

"And what of her?" asked the Duke briefly.

Esdaile glanced at himself in the mirror.

"Gad!" he said, laughing, "will a chit from the country refuse what half the town has languished for?"

The Duke of Southwark turned away and stared out of the window. Despite the wild life he had lived for the last four years he still cherished (almost unknown to himself) certain delusions about love and marriage. The words jarred on him. He fidgetted for a moment, then turned suddenly and faced his friend.

"Don't you give any consideration to the girl?" he blurted out.

Esdaile stared at him a moment in silence. Then he flushed and drew himself up haughtily.

"My wife will have nothing to complain of," he said coldly.

"I'll wager one hundred pounds she will," cried the Duke bluntly, and strode out of the room.

Sir Antony Esdaile noted his departure as little as he had remarked his entrance. He crossed the room thoughtfully, and drew from the bureau a small vellum-covered book, the pages of which were covered with sketches of women. Every type of beauty smiled between these covers,—society toasts, popular actresses, flower-girls, orange-girls, and sweet country innocents of whom he had caught a glimpse on his hurried visits down to his estates in Somersetshire. Long practice had given his hand cunning; the portraits were full of life and character, bringing out in every instance the most beautiful points of

face and figure, marked with the unerring eye of a connoisseur.

Sir Antony turned the pages slowly, pausing sometimes with a slight smile or frown as a face brought back to him pleasant memories or the reverse. At length he found the sketch he sought. It was the picture of a girl standing in a wide oak doorway, her pose a strange mixture of hesitation and dignity. She was evidently very young, and far less beautiful than many of the women sketched in the book. But here the artist had caught the character of the face in a wonderful manner: the firm lines of mouth and chin, resolute despite the babyish dimples, and the deep inscrutable look of the dark eyes, gazing out upon the world—hopeful, wondering, fearless.

Esdaile tore the page carefully out of the book, propped it against a glass, and, flinging himself into a chair, fixed his eyes upon the pictured face, studying every detail of the features, thinking of the day when he had first beheld her.

Some few months before, when riding down in the West, he had lost his way in a heavy snowstorm about twelve miles short of Worcester. After wandering for some hours in drifts, he found himself, about four o'clock, near the little village of Colwall, and turned aside to seek the hospitality of the famous Hornyold Arms rather than push on to Worcester; but as luck willed it, the old inn had been gutted by fire the previous night, and the bare and blackened walls offered no welcome to the belated traveller. Reluctant to face again the difficulties of the road, Esdaile resolved to seek shelter at Mavern Court, which house, he knew well, had been widely renowned for hospitality in old John Hornyold's days. There he was most graciously welcomed by his sixteen-years' old hostess. He remembered how amused he had been at her youth when first he saw her; how amazed, later, to discover that, though totally ignorant of the fashions of the town, of the tattle of society, she was yet neither gauche, stupid, nor uninteresting. She had received him with a pretty mingling of delight and shyness, had presided with grace and dignity over his supper, had listened to his conversation with unaffected

interest and admiration, and entertained him so sweetly that he confessed with surprise he had seldom passed a more delightful evening. Like a little queen she reigned upon her vast estates. Her guardian was on the Continent with Lord Ormont. Her aunt, who lived with her to appease propriety, was merely a be-laced and be-ribboned figurehead. She was the centre of her world, and the *role* suited her to perfection.

All this Esdaile recalled to mind as he sat gazing on the pictured face. He read courage in the eyes, resolution in the mouth, and he nodded his head complacently.

"The thoroughbred horse is ever the best to ride," he muttered. "If a man can live at peace with any woman, it will be with such an one as she."

He filled a glass to the brim and slowly raised it, bowing to the picture. "Here's a health to your ladyship!" he cried.

He looked again at the innocent eyes, at the absurd dimples in the resolute little chin, and his cynical lips curved unexpectedly into a smile of great tenderness.

"I wonder——" he said again softly, "I wonder——"

Then folding the picture, he placed it carefully in his pocket, and so to bed.

The following day he journeyed down to Worcestershire. Three weeks later he was married, with all fitting pomp and ceremony, to Miss Myra Hornyold.

II.

Lady Esdaile sat before her mirror, her maid dressing her hair for Mrs Dacre's ball, while her husband sat near and watched with approval the masses of shining curls. So had he sat many a day, according to the loose customs of the time, and watched the tiring of many a woman's head; but of that his bride knew nothing. Her eyes beamed with pleasant anticipation of the evening's enjoyment; her heart glowed with satisfaction as she read the admiration in her husband's eyes; of a truth she believed herself the happiest woman in Christendom.

She had lived a very quiet life in the seclusion of her country home. Since her father's death she had seen but few men, and they mostly rough country squires or obsequious parsons. Ever since Sir Antony Esdaile had ridden into her life one stormy February night, she had held him as the ideal of all chivalry, courtesy, and gentleness. He seemed to her to be the very personification of Sir Launcelot du Lac, of Tristram the Troubadour, of the pure Sir Percival; for she was a romantic maiden in many ways, and fed her imagination on the stories in Malory's 'Morte d'Arthur,' Spenser's 'Faerie Queene,' and other books in her father's well-stocked library.

She had scarcely expected to meet Sir Antony again; never dreamed he would bestow a second thought on her; but deep in her heart she had cherished his memory as the highest example of all true knighthood, and decking, maidenlike, his courteous bearing with every other virtue, had grown, almost unconsciously, to worship him with all the passion of her ardent nature.

When he had ridden down again to woo her in all the glory of the opening spring, she felt that life had nothing more to offer. For dreaming that he loved her, as she him, with a love born at first sight and fed on memories, she took such love as a pure gift from Heaven, and dedicated her whole life to its service.

Three weeks of wedded life had brought no change to her love-dream. Sir Antony had not exaggerated to himself his powers of pleasing women,—his gentleness and courtesy never flagged. And for himself he was eminently satisfied with his new possession. For despite her sentiment, his wife was not exacting. She had tact, and never wearied him with her devotion, which, to say truth, is a quality few men object to in their wives: she held certain pleasing old-fashioned notions concerning a wife's duty to her husband— notions calculated to give infinite satisfaction to the said husband; she was well read in spite of her youth, she was witty, and she possessed above measure that most inestimable gift, the power of enjoying herself. She threw herself right heartily into all the amusements which London had to offer, and bringing to them a spirit

of enjoyment and a mind determined to be pleased, succeeded in making them, for the time being, palatable even to the jaded taste of her husband.

The Duke of Southwark looked on in amazement, forced to confess his prognostications false, and torn asunder betwixt joy at the happy solution of his friend's difficulties and a sporting regret that he had lost his wager.

Felice tired her mistress's hair with sundry nervous glances in the direction of her master. He was a severe critic, and many a time had insisted upon her re-doing her work more to his satisfaction. But to-night his mind was otherwise occupied, his attention wandered from his wife's toilet.

That morning in the Mall he had encountered Mr Soames, and the latter had challenged him to take his revenge. The challenge had reawakened his passion for the cards—a passion which had slept of late in his pre-occupation with his new possession. But now he felt again the old craving for the familiar atmosphere of "White's," for the tattle and the laughter, for the soft "slip-slip" of the cards, for the excitement of play. Therefore, though not one whit wearied with his wife's company, not one whit less tender or attentive, he was nevertheless resolved to seek his pleasure that evening in his old haunts.

Much to his surprise and chagrin, he found himself hesitating strangely how best to intimate to his wife that the days of the honeymoon were over. But at last, the toilet completed and Felice dismissed, he judged the time arrived when he could no longer delay making clear his intentions.

Lady Esdaile had noted her husband's unwonted abstraction; but her mind was divided between happy anticipation of the evening's pleasure and anxious consideration which set of trinkets would best suit her dress; she gave little serious thought to any other matter.

Sir Antony laughed at himself for his hesitation, and plunged boldly into the subject.

"We will take our leave before supper this evening, Myra; you will be tired out with such late hours."

Myra turned to him in amazement.

"Before supper? Oh, no; it is impossible. Why, the unmasking is to be at the supper, the frolic of the evening. We could not miss that. Indeed, Antony, I am not weary; I am never wearied."

He laughed at her horrified tones.

"Why, what a little gourmande for amusement it is! Believe me, child, you will go to a dozen masquerades before the season is out, each more tedious than the last."

"That may be, but never again to my first," she pleaded with a suggestive pout.

Esdaille shrugged his shoulders slightly. So the best of wives was unreasonable! That should not surprise him, with his knowledge of women; but he had almost grown to hope this one an exception.

"If the first masquerade be so marvellous a matter, the greater reason to return earlier to-night and postpone the pleasure, that the joys of anticipation may be tasted to the full," he argued drily. "And, indeed, child, you must take more rest, you are losing all your roses; you will be an old woman at twenty."

Myra turned an anxious face to her mirror, but what she read there dispelled all anxiety. Her cheeks and eyes glowed as brilliantly as ever; no other woman could boast such a complexion—from the hands of Nature, though it is claimed sometimes that in such matters Art surpasses her foster sister. Clearly, there was no immediate cause for anxiety, Myra decided; consideration for her health could not be the real reason for this stern decree. She had set her heart strangely upon the masquerade; she resolved upon one further effort.

Carefully she selected a pail from the little jewelled box. Then she slowly raised her glowing face to her husband, that he might select the exact spot whereon to place the tiny black speck. And even as he stooped and placed his finger in the corner of her dimple, the dimple deepened into a bewitching smile, the eyes drooped most pathetically, and she coaxed softly:

"Please, dear my lord, I do want to stay for the supper to-night."

Esdaille straightened himself suddenly and laughed.

Every little artful display of feminine wile in this youthful wife of his amused him intensely. And this little comedy was assuredly most prettily played, the combination of laughter and pathos most effective. For a moment he felt moved to yield to her entreaty; but the attraction of "White's" was strong upon him—moreover, he was a man ever cautious about the forming of precedents.

He took the pleading little face between his hands, lightly, not to disturb the towering curls; he stooped and kissed the attractive dimple, and he answered gaily:

"Supper is, I believe, at twelve. With your permission, Madame Delilah, we will order our coach at eleven."

Lady Esdaile received the embrace calmly. She showed no sign of anger, but turned again to her mirror and examined her face reproachfully; she considered it had failed her disgracefully in the hour of need. But the face was too provokingly pretty for its owner to be long angry with it; clearly it was not at fault. Her ladyship was puzzled. This was surely strange conduct for a husband; it was a matter which demanded further inquiry. Curiosity took the place of indignation.

She opened her jewel-box and began to sort her trinkets.

"Will you bring any one to sup with us when we return home?" she asked artlessly.

Sir Antony fidgetted with his ruffles.

"You would be wise, child, to retire early to rest. When I have brought you home I shall—er—go to 'White's' for an hour or so." He spoke a trifle hurriedly. It was absurd, he told himself, that he of all men should feel a qualm at taking his pleasure after his marriage as had been his wont before. And yet he dreaded to meet another look of disappointment on his wife's face.

Lady Esdaile gave a little nod. To "White's"; the secret was out. "White's" was the rival attraction. Wherein then, she wondered, lay the attraction of "White's"?

"Ah! that is where you men go to play. Betty Acton has told me of it. Do they play very high there?"

Esdaile fidgetted. He felt that high play at "White's" was hardly a subject to be freely discussed with his wife.

"Some men play for fair stakes; it depends what you call high play," he answered impatiently.

Myra selected a necklace and raised her arms to clasp it, displaying all the pretty lines of her figure.

"Are men often ruined there?" she asked solemnly.

"Not more often than twice in the day," he answered jestingly.

"Ah, no! tell me," she pleaded. "I am so monstrous interested in 'White's.'"

Sir Antony stepped behind his wife to fasten the clasp with which she was still fumbling; she watched his face in the glass.

"A man has a run of ill-luck at times," he answered rather impatiently. "Why on earth should you trouble your pretty head about such matters?"

"And what does a man do when he is ruined?" she asked eagerly.

"That depends upon the man," he answered, with a shrug.

"What would you do if you were ruined? Oh, Tony, you are pulling my hair with the clasp! You are hurting me."

Indeed, Esdaile had started so violently at the question that he had entangled the necklace in his wife's curls. He stooped and loosed it gently, glad of the diversion. But Myra pursued the subject no further. She had read enough in her husband's face to know that it was distasteful to him, and her desire was ever to please him.

Now, let not a husband think that because his wife ceases to question him upon a subject, her curiosity is therefore satisfied. It is not to be doubted but that husbands will so think when it is a subject upon which they do not desire to be questioned. Sir Antony, with all his knowledge of women, deceived himself in this matter, and as he drove with his wife to Mrs Dacre's ball, he praised the Fates (though doubtless his polite attentions to their sex had deserved some reward) for having bestowed upon him this priceless treasure of a wife, so obedient that she would not even talk on a subject which she felt did not please him.

But his wife sat by his side and wondered and wondered, curious now not only as to the attraction of "White's," but also as to why he did not wish to talk of it.

Let not a husband dream that because a wife ceases to question him upon a subject she will also cease to question all the world upon it.

Fate is ever ready with her instruments. Sir Lionel Pilkerton was an ever-ready-tongued instrument in the hands of Fate. When Sir Antony saw his wife, in her dainty masque and domino, led away by this iris-tinted chatterer, he little dreamed what evil resolutions curiosity was fermenting in that silk-hooded head.

Sir Lionel was of an age—or, rather, of a youth—to take keen pleasure in administering to the curiosity of a pretty woman, especially when, in answering her questions, he was able to show to what a sportive set he belonged, and what a dashing blade he himself was. For the rest he was innocent enough, with fond aspirations after dandyism, and a whole-hearted admiration for Antony Esdaile—one of the most noted dandies of his acquaintance.

He was only too ready to enlarge upon the subject of the famous gambling club of his set. He himself counted his membership but by weeks, and the place still had for him much of that mysterious fascination which hovers round unknown but imagined wickedness.

"Egad, madame, you should see us! Fortunes change hands every night. You should see the wager-book; it would interest you monstrously. Why, t'other night I did but drop my handkerchief: Harry Ford bet me £100 ten men would drop theirs within the hour. And, gad! he won it too. Oh! he'll wager the coat off his back. T'other day he wagered his new Malacca he'd sneeze more times in an hour than any other member of the club. But Peter Wildmore put pepper in his snuff-box, and handed it to Soames; so Harry lost."

He chattered on contentedly, forgetting to whom he was speaking, conscious only of interested ejaculations, and a pair of admiring eyes fixed on him from behind a velvet mask.

"Cards? Oh, Lord, yes! *Ecarté* is the game just now.

Thousands change hands each night. But, you see, fortune varies so often, it comes to the same thing in the end. Toother day I lost £300 to Soames in the afternoon and won it back from Southwark in the evening. It takes a long run of bad luck to break a fellow."

Lady Esdaile was intensely interested. She deemed she was seeing life—learning the secrets of that mysterious club life, which was a sealed book to her, of which her husband would not talk: she believed she was studying the nature of that incomprehensible creature—Man.

"Now tell me," she coaxed, clasping her hands under her chin with childish eagerness, "what does a man do—what does he say—when he is ruined?"

Sir Lionel laughed at the feminine question.

"Oh, Lord! madame, I can't tell you. Some laugh and some swear."

"Do they look very miserable?" asked the girl sympathetically.

"Ah, well, some do look a bit green. For it isn't vastly pleasant, you see, to know that you have lost every penny you have in the world." Sir Lionel spoke as though he had experienced this many times. "But, to my way of thinking, a man shouldn't play unless he can lose money without making another gentleman feel uncomfortable. Now, you know, when Tony Esdaile was beggared by Soames last April, not a soul could have known he was touched—not by his manner, you know."

Myra started. "Tony Esdaile, did you say? Was he ruined?"

"Gad! yes," cried Sir Lionel, with a little laugh at her innocence. "You wouldn't think it to see him now, would you? But he was cleared of every penny, and took it as calmly as if he were playing for paper. Now, that's how a gentleman should play—to my thinking," added this enthusiastic admirer.

"But—but are you sure? When was this?" cried the amazed wife.

"Last April, the third Tuesday o' the month. I remember the day, because I was wearing my lavender and silver for the first time. Sure! Gad! yes. Southwark told me he

was in as deep as he could be. He had a week of steady bad luck, and he was playing with Soames: no man could stand against that with Soames' stakes."

Myra made a rapid comparison of dates.

"But what did he do?" she urged.

Sir Lionel laughed admiringly.

"What did he do? Egad! you can trust Esdaile to know what to do. One man would have gone under, another blown out his brains; but not Tony Esdaile. Lord, no! He went and married."

It was out now, the secret she had so sedulously hunted. She sat, cold as stone, staring at her wrecked castle in the air, while Sir Lionel laughed at the cleverness of his hero, in blissful ignorance of what he had said and to whom he had said it.

"Capital fellow, Esdaile," he continued. "Marries a woman with a fortune three weeks after he had lost his own. And, Gad! you know, he's such a good fellow. I bet you one hundred crowns his wife will never know it."

That roused her. In a sudden rush the frost of misery turned to the fire of anger, of injured pride. For clearly the world looked upon her as an innocent, a simpleton, duped by her husband. Oh, it was intolerable! And it was true—true. Such a simpleton she was—she who had fondly dreamed her husband had sought her for love, forgetting the hateful gold which alone had enticed him, and which she in her innocence had considered of no account. In a flash she remembered all the love she had showered upon him—the caresses, the vows—confidently dreaming the love was returned. How he must have laughed at her, this man—at the dupe, his wife! Ay! how all the world must have laughed at her! The hot blood surged to her face in a passion of shame.

And then sudden, unreasoning terror seized her lest Sir Lionel should consider what he had done. The feeling which prompts all acute misery to hide itself from every eye prompted her to struggle desperately against such a chance. She could not endure that he should discover to whom he had spoken, should pity her. But any moment

her husband might come up and claim her, and Sir Lionel would remember her identity.

With woman's wonderful quickness of wit she turned her companion's thoughts into another channel, her intuition telling her what subject would best fill his mind.

"Your lavender and silver coat?" she said, musingly, and only a very careful ear could have noted the harshness of the tone. "I do not remember it. Surely you have not worn it often?"

"Only twice, madame," answered Sir Lionel regretfully. The diversion was complete: his thoughts had flown from gambling to that second most expensive occupation which filled his thoughts. "Only twice. The second, the very second time I wore it, madame, Steward called for me in his coach. He was in a hurry, and I forgot my cane. My fool of a man, Jackson, ran after me with one and threw it into the coach, and when we reached the Mall—would you believe it, madame?—I found he had given me a cane with a crimson tassel. Crimson and lavender!" Sir Lionel shrugged his shoulders, a world of despair in the gesture. "What could I do, madame? Of course a man can't walk in the Mall without a cane. Steward was in sky-blue—no better; I could not take his. It was a catastrophe; I shall never forget it. Lady Winston noted it at once. I heard her ask Steward what was the matter with my eye, and he told her I was dazzled by her ladyship. Clever, I thought that—monstrous clever. And next day, gad! would you believe it, madame? there were no less than three men in the Mall in lavender and crimson,—counter-jumpers, of course—the colours likely to take them. But you will understand I couldn't wear the coat again. And only the second time on!"

Sir Lionel babbled on contentedly, discussing that most fascinating subject, the rivalling of the lilies of the field; and Myra, relieved from her first anxiety, was free to give her whole thoughts to the monstrosities of her husband's conduct.

The more she considered it, the more did her anger increase. Like too many of her sex, finding him deficient in one virtue with which she had decked him, she promptly

concluded him a stranger to all virtue. She forgot his gentleness, courtesy, kindness. She remembered only that she had given him youth, love, innocence, all the pure thoughts and dreams of her maidenhood, and he had taken all and given nothing in return; nay, he had not even valued her gift, only the sordid accompaniment of her fortune. He seemed, to her angry judgment, a monster of villainy, he who but an hour since had been the ideal of all her dreams. It was wretched, unbearable, to feel that she was bound for ever to such a one, her life ruined at its commencement. But even the thought of future misery faded in the present sting to her pride. Oh! she had queened it finely down on her lands in the west; never had she known a moment's slight; she had been all in all. And now! what was she but an unvalued appendage to this man, her husband, an undesired purse bearing the money he valued so highly, that he had sold his liberty to gain it?

At that thought her eyes flashed, her face hardened. At least he had sacrificed his liberty, at least she was his wife. She would show him that a man cannot marry with impunity, that a wife cannot be flung aside like an empty purse when her husband has had his use of her. She set her teeth and raised her head defiantly.

Suddenly he appeared, making his way towards her through the crowd. For a moment she forgot her anger; her eyes brightened, her lips smiled as of old at sight of him; she remembered only her love. Then she hardened her heart, hugging her grievance, and turned to meet him with defiance in her eyes.

"Our coach is here, Myra," he said softly. "If your ladyship is ready we will——"

"Lud! sir, you are surely crazy!" she cried, with a light laugh. "I shall not leave here for another hour at least. I must be at the supper for the unmasking."

Esdaile stared at her in amazement. Was this the submissive wife with whom he had parted but a short half-hour since? She returned his glance with a look of defiance.

"I had understood you were willing we should take our leave now," he urged.

She tossed her head in perfect imitation of Lady Darcy, his pet detestation.

"I cannot be responsible for your imperfect understanding. Perhaps I have changed my mind. But I shall remain here for supper."

To wrangle with his wife was one of the things "we do not do," as he would have said—quite outside his code. The leader of the Macaronis could not so soil his dignity.

"As your ladyship wishes," he said politely. "The coach and I can well await your pleasure."

But though his words, his manner, were the acme of politeness, his eyes were angry. It was too much that she should submit to him in private when he could urge his way, and defy him in public when she knew him helpless. Could a man never hope to plumb the depths of woman's wiles?

As for Lady Esdaile, she was as amazed at her husband's submission as he at his wife's defiance. She had as yet but little comprehension of his character. For here was a man who would wed a woman for her fortune without a qualm, but would rather die than be betrayed into one moment's lack of courtesy to any woman.

"Lud! sir, don't wait for me," she cried quickly. "I doubt not I shall find a very ready escort. Do you go to your cards and wine. Only, I counsel you, be prudent in your play. In England a man can have but one wife at a time."

She swept past him with an affected laugh, and crossed to join Lady Betty Acton.

Sir Antony started and looked after her with dawning comprehension. Had she then divined, had she been told, the reason of his marriage? If that were so, her little act of defiance was perhaps natural—unpleasant, but natural, and to be condoned. A trifle of patience, and doubtless the storm would pass.

Twenty minutes later Lady Esdaile tired of the dance, and her coach was called. Sir Antony took this as a first sign of relenting. Nevertheless he was discreet; he stood

aside submissively while Lord Seaton cloaked his wife, and he followed her into the coach with the air of one who feels he has justly deserved punishment. But once safely seated beside her he deemed it wise to encourage his wife's forgiving spirit by some little show of forgiveness on his part, and taking her hand, he raised it tenderly to his lips as a prelude to further gallantry.

Myra turned and looked at him coldly.

"Alas! sir," she said slowly, "you already possess my fortune; this poor hand has nothing further to bestow. May it not then be spared further insult?"

He relinquished her hand with an almost imperceptible shrug of his shoulders. The storm, then, had not passed.

"Do you think I have quite deserved that, Myra?" he asked gravely.

"Deserved!" she answered, in the same calm tones. "If we talk of deserts, sir, I think you have deserved to be hanged at Tyburn like the common thief you are."

Esdaile took a pinch of snuff slowly, and settled his ruffles. It was evident the affair was more serious than he had imagined. This was no sudden blaze of indignation on his wife's part, but a quiet, contained resentment, far more difficult to meet. He had not expected this, and could not yet understand her ground for such a feeling.

He was genuinely sorry that the thing had occurred. He had hoped—vainly, he felt, in such a world of tattlers—that his wife might ever remain ignorant of the reason of his marriage. He had found her illusions very sweet, her firm conviction of their mutual love very pleasant. He had been a fool to dream the former state of things could last, and yet surely he could scarcely have anticipated that she would take the affair so much to heart.

Still the matter must be faced, and faced in as gentlemanly a fashion as he had ever sought to meet all former blows with which it had pleased fortune to pester him.

"It would appear I have been so unfortunate as to annoy your ladyship," he said calmly. "May I learn with what I have to reproach myself?"

"Do you, then, never reproach yourself with having married me?" she asked in a low voice.

"I regret extremely, madame, if our marriage prove distasteful to you ; but, alas ! I cannot reproach myself for an act which has brought me such consummate happiness."

"Do you then deny that you married me for my fortune ?" she asked sharply, chafing under his quiet gallantry.

Sir Antony lifted his eyebrows slightly ; such plain speaking seemed a trifle unnecessary.

"It were surely idle to deny what all the world so vehemently asserts," he fenced, cautiously.

Then Myra Esdaile proved herself true daughter of Eve, the temptress. For she knew now—oh ! she knew well that Sir Lionel's story was true ; her husband had indeed sought her fortune ; yet she laid her two hands softly on his arm, and lifted pleading eyes to his face.

"Ah ! tell me, truly, Tony," she murmured, softly, "when you sought me down yonder in Worcestershire, was it love of my person that drew you—or desire for my wealth ?"

For a moment Sir Antony hesitated ; but his code did not permit a man to lie to his wife—unnecessarily ! Moreover, since a man's motives are seldom unmixed, he knew she would not believe the lie, and he was not one to be content with a patched-up peace when his aim was clear victory.

He did the best he could ; he took her hands in his own, tenderly, and his eyes expressed many things a woman loves to read there. But he gave her the full truth.

"It isn't to be denied, Myra, that when I sought your hand I was deucedly in need of money ; but I think your mirror might suggest to you, child, a further motive for my wooing."

Lady Esdaile snatched away her hands and turned an angry shoulder to him. Had he lied to her she would have despised him, and she knew it ; but in that he spake the truth, he made her despise herself—no pleasant matter for a woman of spirit. She had yet to learn that it is better a thousandfold for a woman to despise herself—ay, to the uttermost—than to be tied for life to a man whom she despises. For despising herself a woman may take heart and reform herself ; but who shall adventure the reform of

a husband? That is a task fitted for none but a very perfect lover.

But Myra knew only that she had been duped, or had duped herself—still more distressing thought; and that 'his man, her husband, would not lie to her to save her minutes' shame. Therefore she turned her back and answered angrily:

"Such remarks are an insult, sir; the time for gallantry is past."

"In my humble opinion, madame, the time for politeness is never passed. But, as you will; my only desire is to pleasure your ladyship."

"You would pleasure me best by never speaking to me again."

The coach drew up at their door. She must perforce suffer him to hand her into the house and up the stairway to her boudoir. Her fingers lay stiffly in his. He looked down at the tiny hand, at the childish figure, at the youthful face, set hard and cold. It seemed absurd to be angry with such a child.—absurd to take her in any way seriously.

He caught her hands in his and looked down at her, smiling whimsically.

"Come, child, it was monstrous sinful of me to marry you, and I crave your pardon; though dence take me if I can be sorry I did it. But now—is there need for further disagreement? When all is said, we are fast married—we cannot undo that. Cannot we make the best of it?"

Myra's dignity was hurt by such unwarrantable proceedings. She withdrew her hands from his, and crossing to a mirror, began calmly to re-settle her curls.

"As you say, sir," she drawled, "we are fast married. And doubtless there are certain advantages connected with my position as Lady Esdaile; I will seek them out and make the best of them—as you suggest. For the rest, I ask of your courtesy that I may be troubled as little as possible with the disadvantage of our union."

"Which disadvantage, madame, is——?"

"Yourself."

A gentleman may not lose his temper with his wife; but

women are occasionally undeniably irritating. Sir Antony crossed the room and opened the door of his wife's apartments, deeming it wiser that the interview should end.

"I will do my best to further your desires, madame," he said coldly, "and will demand in return but one boon—oh, *entreat*, if you prefer it: if you should ever find yourself—as doubtless you will—in such a position as to require the service of a gentleman, may I beg you to recollect that you are married, and that I have the honour to be your husband? For the rest, I think the house should be large enough to hold us both; but if my presence here annoys you, I can doubtless find accommodation elsewhere."

"Your presence will not annoy me, sir; I do not conceive that I shall in any way regard it."

She swept him a low curtsy and passed on into her room.

Her husband looked after her and smiled ruefully. It was absurd that he, of all men, should be flouted by a woman, by such a child. But this woman was his wife, which gave a plaguey different aspect to the affair. For though there be many ways of managing women, there are many things a man cannot do to his wife.

So he watched her depart with a rueful smile and then swung off to "White's." And there, Fortune being in an ironic mood, he won back from Mr Soames a sum large enough to have paid the debts which, but six weeks before, had sent him to woo the wife who so deeply resented the wooing.

III.

Lady Betty Acton was a charming woman, but she had one fault. Her admirers, indeed, averred it was no fault, rather the virtue of intense human sympathy; her enemies—and, alack! they were many—said, bluntly, that she was a mischief-maker. But be it vice or virtue, be the cause human kindness or love of mischief, the result was the same—a most feminine desire to interfere in her neighbours' affairs.

"For Heaven's sake, child, don't you interfere!" Lord

Charles Acton would exclaim a dozen times a-day, when his wife was explaining to him the details of whatever domestic complication was at the moment exciting her interest; and Lady Betty would listen demurely to his lectures on the necessity of leaving folk to manage their own affairs, and would agree heartily as to the wisdom of his remarks, yet the very next day, sure as fate, away she would go and plunge, not a finger only, but both hands, deep into the re-making of her neighbours' pies. Lord Charles would tear his hair in desperation, but, after all, what else could he expect?—his wife was a woman.

From the first Lady Betty had taken an interest in Sir Antony Esdaile's wife. Her youth, and a certain quaint, childish dignity, had attracted the versatile lady; moreover, she knew many things concerning Sir Antony which were hidden from his wife, and the union of the couple amused her. But as long as Sir Antony and Lady Esdaile continued their honeymoon Betty's interest was passive, confined to a general supervision of Myra's friends, and an occasional judicious enlightenment as to their character.

But when the honeymoon ended abruptly, when Sir Antony returned to his bachelor habits, spent his evenings at "White's," his mornings in attendance upon such women as Lady Darcy and Mrs Clarke, while Lady Esdaile threw herself ever more and more feverishly into all the follies and extravagances of the town; when, moreover, it was clear to such an astute observer as Lady Betty that neither husband nor wife was happier for the change,—this self-constituted Fate deemed it time to interfere.

To Soho Square, then, went Lady Betty, the spirit of Fate strong upon her. Lady Esdaile welcomed her gladly, but Betty wasted small time on social amenities.

She seated herself at once, in a commanding position before her friend's mirror, and providing herself with a box of trinkets with which to occupy the outlying portions of her mind, prepared to break the ice. Betty always preferred to perform this delicate operation with a sledgehammer.

"Any woman who has a pleasant husband and isn't happy with him is a fool," she announced sternly.

Lady Esdaile was bending over a pile of brocades at the far side of the room. She sprang to her feet and faced Betty, with crimson cheeks and flashing eyes.

"Er—Louisa Sayer, for example," said Betty hurriedly, taking refuge in a base subterfuge.

Myra flushed and nodded gravely, as though she clearly understood the previous remark could apply to no one else.

Lady Betty recalled her fleeting courage: who was she to fear a woman's flashing eye? Again the sledge-hammer descended.

"Any woman who has any sort of a husband and does not make the best of him is a fool."

No answer. Betty looked out of the corner of her eyes at her companion; but here were no more eye-flashings, —Lady Esdaile's head was bent low over the brocade.

There was a moment's silence. Betty was a trifle non-plussed. It is so inconvenient carrying on a conversation when the conversee will not even show her face.

Suddenly from the far side of the room came a low, but audible, sniff.

Betty turned and smiled triumphantly at her reflection in the mirror.

"Any woman," she said emphatically, "who cries over any husband is a monstrous fool, especially if she have any pretension to good looks."

Myra rose and crossed slowly to her side.

"Betty," she said woefully, "do you know—that man—my husband—has dared to marry me for my fortune."

"Tut! the wretch!" said Betty calmly, trying the effect of a garnet chain on her white neck.

"You aren't very sympathetic, Betty," said Myra, eyeing her doubtfully.

"Well, my dear, a man must have some reason for marrying you," argued Betty. "Only a fool marries a woman without any reason."

"Then I prefer fools," said Myra softly.

"Thank your stars you live among them," said Betty sharply.

"Betty, why did Lord Charles marry you?" questioned

Myra, with a view to carrying the war into the enemy's country.

Betty glanced at her reflection in the glass, as though she considered the reason was writ fair on her countenance. But she remembered that she was talking with a woman, so she refrained from giving such an explanation of the matter.

"Charles married me to reform him," she said, with a little smile of reminiscence; "it has acted monstrous well. He is so busy looking after me that he has no time to get into mischief himself."

Myra sighed deeply.

"I had rather have starved than have been wed for my fortune," she said dolefully.

"How do you know it was for your fortune?" asked Betty, though she herself had never doubted the fact.

"He told me so himself."

Betty bounced round in her chair and faced the speaker, wild with excitement. "Told you himself?" she cried eagerly. For a man who would tell a woman that, must either be a brute or something quite inexplicable, and Lady Betty had reasons for knowing that Antony Esdaile was not the former.

"Oh! how vastly interesting," she murmured rapturously.

"Interesting!" cried Myra reproachfully; "it is horrible, horrible!"

"My dear," said Betty solemnly, "you have no sense of—of anything that you should have."

"But what would you do if you were in my place?" questioned Myra meekly, crushed beneath Betty's scorn.

"Do! There are only two alternatives—and weeping isn't one of them. You must either forgive the wretch——"

"That I will not," and Lady Esdaile set her mouth obstinately.

"Or punish him," continued Betty calmly.

"But that is just what I cannot do," cried Myra impatiently. "I have tried: I haven't spoken to him for three weeks."

"Oh! does he want you to speak to him?" asked Betty calmly, examining her beringed fingers.

"No—no, I don't suppose he does," said Myra doubtfully, and her thoughts wandered sympathetically to Job.

"Then why be silent? A woman should never be too hard on herself. If I were you I should talk to him all day long."

"He would answer me with gallantries and then away to 'White's.' Oh, Betty! how can a woman punish a man like that?"

"Neither you nor I, Myra, has the very least idea yet what kind of a man he really is," said Betty solemnly. "But be sure of this: no woman can hurt a man until she has made him in love with her. Men are too obtuse. And it is vastly tedious annoying a man who does not even notice it. Make the man in love with you—then you can do what you will with him."

Myra saw clearly the wisdom of this. But still her brow puckered.

"But, Betty," she urged, "if I—if I am—er—nice to him, he will think I have forgiven him."

"There are more ways than one of making a man in love with you," said Betty mysteriously. "Besides, a woman can always deny with her eyes what she says with her lips. But be careful, child, or as like as not you will fall in love with the man yourself. Other women have done so before now. He has a certain way—be careful."

Myra waved away the suggestion with scorn.

"At least," she said triumphantly, "I am spending as much of my fortune as I can myself. My masquerade shall be the finest of the season, Betty."

Lady Betty took her leave and returned home in triumph. She felt she had done a good morning's work; for surely any woman as pretty as Myra Esdaile could make a man (not otherwise engaged) in love with her, if she but set her mind to the matter. And is it not the surest way to make a woman fall in love with a man, to warn her against him, especially if the warning be spiced with a hint of other women? Lady Betty contemplated her own cleverness with amazement.

And yet she was anxious. It was clear Sir Antony was an uncommon man, cleverer than most. And when a man attempts to be clever in such an affair as this, Betty knew that the results are usually disastrous. It would be so like a man to spoil all her work by neglecting his wife. For neglect is a thing no woman can forgive; and how can a man, neglecting his wife, be made to fall in love with her?

Lady Betty sighed again over man's obtuseness. She would gladly have attacked Sir Antony himself, as she had attacked his wife, only—men are so strangely prejudiced against woman's interference.

No; here was a case in which she must have a man's help. She donned her prettiest gown, coaxed her husband for half an hour, and—asked Lord Wildmore to dine.

Here the veil falls. We can follow her ladyship no further in her intrigues. Was it indeed she who inspired the celebrated wager? Was it alone for the sake of one couple that society was thrown into such a pothor of wooing through the early days of July? Who can know the truth? All we can assert with certainty is that a week after Lady Betty's interview with Myra Esdaile, Lord Wildmore laid his wager at "White's," and, incited thereto by Lord Charles Acton, Sir Antony Esdaile took up the bet and stood pledged to win his wife's favour ere three weeks be passed.

Who will deny that Lady Betty Acton was a wonderful woman?

IV.

Myra Esdaile, though she would scarce have acknowledged the fact, was mightily comforted by Lady Betty Acton's advice, and at once laid her plans for that most fascinating of games, the ensnaring of man's affections. Young though she was, she knew well that the surest way to excite a man's interest is to appeal to his help; so recalling her husband's side of their bargain, she ensnared him by his own commands.

Sir Antony was surprised the following evening by receiving a message from his wife, desiring to speak with him. He waited upon her in her boudoir, and noted at once that

her face wore neither the look of cold hatred nor of haughty abstraction with which she had of late been wont to mask her features in his presence. She met him with an air of business.

"I have sent for you, sir," she said frankly, "because I require your services. You see, I fulfil my side of our bargain."

"My services are ever at your disposal, madame. I trust you are satisfied with my fulfilment of—er—your desires."

"Perfectly," answered Myra calmly. "Were it not for my ring and my title I should scarce know I was married."

"A matter doubtless for fervent thanksgiving," answered her husband with becoming gravity.

He surveyed his wife with satisfaction. She was attired to perfection, being a woman born with an absolute understanding of the art and influence of dress. Who can say what hours had been devoted to the designing of her costume? Seeing her thus in friendly mood after the weeks of estrangement, he was struck anew with a pleasurable pride in her beauty, and with a certain tender amusement at her absurd youthfulness.

He drew up a chair and satisfied his taste with a slow, critical examination of her toilet. Her eyes danced with triumph as she read the admiration in his eyes.

"In what can my poor services pleasure you, madame?" he asked.

"In three ways. First—I am buying a horse from Lord Seaton."

Esdaile laughed. "You are right, madame,—that is a question upon which I should at least be able to assist you. What manner of a spavined screw is Seaton offering for your edification?"

Myra pouted indignantly.

"I know a vast deal about horses," she said, "and this is a monstrous pretty animal, a blue roan. Much the colour of that coat you wore last Tuesday se'nnight."

"I am gratified by the comparison," he laughed, "but though the coat makes the man there are other considerations in dealing with horseflesh. That colour often means temper."

"I like his paces; I have ridden him twice in the Mall."

"Ah-h! with the escort of the owner, doubtless," he frowned slightly. "Your ladyship appears to have gone some steps towards purchase."

"Yes," she answered calmly, "I nearly bought him myself; but there are a few details about fetlocks and teeth and things which perhaps I may not understand; so I ask your help."

He could not resist a laugh at her quaintly expressed ignorance.

"I will see the animal in the morning. If 'teeth and fetlocks and things' don't prove all to be wished, I know of one or two more horses likely to suit you."

"Ah! tell me."

In a few minutes Sir Antony was surprised to find himself launched into a discussion of his favourite topic, horse-flesh. And with no uninterested companion; for despite her declared ignorance of the matter Myra was country-born, and who should know a good horse when she saw it if not the daughter of old John Hornyold?

"There is another matter upon which I would ask your help," she said at length when the conversation waned, and he noted that she spoke with a certain air of embarrassment. "I am dining with Lord Seaton to-morrow at the floating coffee-house, to discuss the purchase. I would be obliged if you would make a third—at—er—our meeting."

"With pleasure, madame." His voice was grave, and he frowned slightly.

"I shall be—er—grateful for your escort."

"Be assured I shall not fail you."

There was a pause. Sir Antony rose to take his leave. His wife looked up quickly.

"Oh! I am loath to trouble you a third time," she cried hurriedly, "but——"

He resumed his seat, and waited gravely for further confidences.

"'Tis too absurd! But I have promised to play *ecarté* w'th Louisa Sayer to-morrow, and—I have no notion of the game? Would you instruct me?"

Again he smiled at the calm lordliness of the request; but he assented with ready goodwill.

"I will do my best to explain what experience alone can teach; but it's a science I wouldn't advise your ladyship to study too closely."

"No! from all I hear it is the cause of much misery," she answered, and glanced at him half-defiantly.

So the cards were brought, and they sat down to play. She was not an apt pupil, though her master was one of the most skilled players of the day: she had no love for the cards. Still they played; and she puckered her brows prettily over his instructions, and made merry over her mistakes, and her eyes sought his mischievously, and their hands met in passing the cards. And he enjoyed himself hugely, as every man enjoys teaching a beautiful woman. Moreover, he appreciated the game she was playing, and admired her skill. Her every touch was a caress, her every gesture alluring; but every touch and every gesture were denied next moment by the frank companionship of her glance. Instinct has endowed women very generously in some matters.

But as the evening passed her gaiety died away; she grew quiet, languid. She even sighed twice, half-unconscious sighs, fraught with memories. Suddenly she lifted her eyes to his for a brief moment: they were dark with tears, full of helpless misery.

The loneliness, the longing they revealed went straight to his heart. He dropped his cards, leant forward, and put his hands, palm upwards, on the table before her.

"Myra," he said coaxingly. Would she not lay her hands in his, surrender, and be at peace?

Lady Esdaile slowly counted a pile of silver into the upturned palm.

"Ah! your winnings, sir," she drawled. "Believe me, I had not forgotten them. I know well how—er—eager you are with regard to such matters."

For a moment Sir Antony was strongly tempted to throw the money at his wife; but he restrained himself, and in a moment he laughed,—laughed at the calm impudence of this child who dared to flout him thus.

For the shadow of a second a smile gleamed in her ladyship's eyes, and her lips twitched. Then she rose, thanked him gravely for her lesson, and curtsying with much dignity, dismissed him.

That evening Sir Antony Esdaile did not seek the solation of the Gamecock Club: he sat at home, and with the assistance of much tobacco puzzled out yet another chapter in his *Study of Man's Helpmate*.

The following day Myra Esdaile abandoned her frontal attack and opened a new plan of campaign, resolved to try all measures to subdue the fortress. If a man will not surrender to helplessness, a rival may inspire him, she opined.

She had not far to seek for such a rival. Lord Seaton, that devotee of *débutantes*, that perverter of youth and innocence, had long marked her as fit object for his gallantries, and had taken ready advantage of Sir Antony's neglect. But though willing enough to play the part of consoler to an unhappy wife, Lord Seaton was by no means minded to act as decoy to another's quarry. When a note from her ladyship informed him that her husband would be of the party at dinner that afternoon he guessed clearly the part she intended he should perform, and taking the game into his own hands he invited his sister, Lady Sybilla Seaton, to make a fourth at his dinner, and by this simple manœuvre completely upset the plans of the unwary huntress. For the new tactics Myra Esdaile had chosen to adopt are those known to the feminine world as the art of pique. She had pressed her husband into the company that she might display her charms to him through the medium of another man's eyes, lavish her smiles upon the decoy with an occasional encouraging glance at the quarry, and prove to the latter that others at least find pleasure in the ensnaring pastures he scorns. But of what avail her plans, when the evening through the said husband was languished at by Sybilla Seaton in the front of the balcony, and she left victim to the unwelcome gallantries of Lord Seaton at the back?—gallantries so skilful, that her youthful inexperience could by no means resist. She was indeed out-generalled, and Percy Seaton had an easy game to

play, for Myra, blinded by a very sour fit of temper at the failure of her scheme, followed his guidance, exchanging snare for smile, favour for entreaty, with ever a defiant glance at her husband's back bowed courteously over Lady Sybilla. Well was it for her she possessed a husband with eyes for other matters besides her ladyship's tender smiles.

So the evening passed. Only when she returned home did Myra remember, somewhat late in the day, the use certain men had made of favours as carelessly bestowed as that which she had yielded to Lord Seaton, and remembering this she knew a sudden fear for the safety of her good name.

But Sir Antony Esdaile, having eyes to see, when he had escorted home his silent wife sought out his late host and bore him off to supper. For he bethought himself that though a woman may be fought over, her good name will be little increased thereby, and herein he showed himself wise: any swashbuckler can fight for his wife,—it requires a man to defend her honour.

Therefore he warmed his guest's heart with wine, and cheered him with stories of good comradeship, before he broached the matter in hand.

"I think, Seaton," he drawled casually, when the evening was far spent, "you have a portrait of my wife with a lock of her hair which—er—doubtless you are waiting opportunity to return to her. As I shall see her—before you again have that honour—let me save you the trouble."

He did not look at his guest; with one hand he re-filled his glass, the other hand he held out for the miniature. There was a pause; then Lord Seaton put the favour he had won that night into the outstretched hand, knowing well that with that he tacitly relinquished whatever else that evening had brought him.

He had no personal objection to fighting his host, or any other man; but having eaten a good supper, drunk good wine, and sold an expensive horse, it seemed hardly worth the trouble to fight for any woman's favour. The affair was so vastly unimportant.

During the next twelve hours, by dint of brooding alone

over the events of the past evening. Myra worked herself up into an agony of shame and fear about a matter which, to more experienced eyes, would doubtless have appeared too unimportant to be considered. Old John Hornyold had given his daughter much old-fashioned teaching concerning a woman's loyalty,—that virtue somewhat overlooked in these modern days.

Her first impulse was to go to Lord Seaton and "explain things"; but fortunately she had too great horror of the man to risk a further chance of putting herself in his power. She thought of flying to Lady Betty for comfort, but remembered certain disconcerting remarks that lady had at times let fall concerning the fools who trusted Percy Seaton. She doubted whether Betty would have much comfort to bestow. But it appeared imperatively necessary that someone should comfort and help her.

As she brooded over the matter, suddenly her eyes flashed, and her cheeks flushed with a strange, daring thought. Had not her husband commanded her to go to him for help when she needed his services? Was it not at least her duty to obey her husband? It was doubtless a somewhat risky step to take, and for that reason she adopted it forthwith: this daughter of old John Hornyold was one to delight in playing with fire.

So she sent again for her husband and demanded his services. But there was hesitation in her speech, and a certain fear in her eyes, when she explained to him her trouble.

"I have seen Lord Seaton—many times of late," she began bluntly. "It appears—he—er—has some slight—er—regard for my poor person; he has several times entreated for my portrait. I gave it to him last night. I—I want it back again."

Without a word Antony laid the miniature on the table before her. She started at sight of it and looked up with a sudden smile of gratitude. Their eyes met, and in that moment she realised for the first time that this man, her husband, whatever might be his faults, was at least no man to be ensnared or flouted at will, to be mocked with impunity. She understood this with a sudden glow of

pride. But the more she knew him for a man of resolution the less would she forgive him. Had he not done her one of the gravest wrongs a man can do to a woman, marrying her without love?

So she hardened her heart.

"Thank you," she said calmly; "that is all I require."

Sir Antony Esdaile was very angry. What manner of woman was this wife of his that she dared thus to sport with his honour and then knew nor fear nor shame in crying to him for help? Flouting him even when she owed him deepest gratitude? Clearly a woman to be conquered—with a high hand if need be. A woman possibly worth the conquering, if a man could control his temper sufficiently to encompass the task.

He stood and looked down at her gravely. Again the sight of her youth touched him.

"There are certain evil-smelling weeds, madame," he began quietly, "beautiful to look upon, doubtless, but held by the wary at a distance. Seaton is such a weed, and I would entreat you—" he broke off suddenly, with a laugh of exasperation. "What the plague, child, do you want with a man like that? Does no woman recognise a scoundrel when she sees one?"

Myra looked pathetic.

"A woman must talk to somebody," she muttered vaguely.

"All who have studied the sex assure us of that fact," he answered drily, "but I would venture to suggest there are others. Lady Betty Acton, whom I have observed is a friend of yours, Miss Plunkett—er—little Peggy Beauchamp—cannot you talk to them?"

Myra yawned slightly at the suggestion.

"They are agreeable enough; but a woman needs at times a man's mind to hold to, else she will fall into the depths,—a woman's depths,—the vapours."

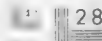
He winced. "May I remind your ladyship of a trifling fact which has probably escaped your notice, namely, that you have a husband?"

"True! A husband who has deprived me of a woman's privilege of trusting her husband," she answered defiantly.



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She felt he was growing angry, and had a very feminine joy in the knowledge.

"If that be the case I can't help you; but I would advise you, if you must have a man's mind to lean upon, to choose your man."

Myra threw him the tiniest glance of insolence from under her lashes.

"I have somewhat lost faith in my powers of choice," she said quietly.

Sir Antony wished for a moment that it was customary for a gentleman to shake his wife.

"You can be at rest upon one matter," he said shortly, turning to leave her, "Seaton will trouble you no more."

To his amaze she suddenly sprang to her feet and seized his arm, her whole face transfigured with a very real fear.

"Oh! you are not going to fight? You will not fight him? Ah! no, not that! He is such a swordsman. You must not fight."

Antony stared down into the terrified face raised to his, and in that moment he read in her eyes a simple fact which had hitherto escaped his notice, namely, that despite her anger, despite her defiance, despite her insolence and injured pride, his wife loved him as dearly as on the day when he had first sought her hand. This little moment of reality, when the curtain was dropped and the lights turned on between the acts, revealed the fact to him. The insolence and the anger were but half real, the fear of his death was the one thing true.

It was a pleasurable discovery, and one that simplified the matter amazingly.

"Fight him?" he answered lightly—"not I! Seaton and I understand each other."

She dropped his hand and stood for a moment silent, recollecting the part she had elected to play, recalling her list of his villainies.

"Ah!" she said, with a little laugh, "I scarce thought you would. He—he is a good swordsman. Some men when they are ruined blow out their brains; you—married. No, I suppose you wouldn't be likely to fight him."

Sir Antony Esdaile turned abruptly and strode out of the room. A man may not lose his temper with his wife. It is—regrettable!

V.

Sir Antony Esdaile left his wife's rooms as angry as a man might be. Yet so powerful are the darts of Cupid, before another day had passed he had taken up Lord Wildmore's wager and pledged himself to seek her favour with all the arts devotion or cunning could contrive.

Why he had done this he scarcely knew himself. But Myra's defiance incited him to conquest; Lord Charles Acton's challenge inspired him to the task. He was in holiday mood, of a mind to be a-wooing, and wherein lies the pleasure of wooing a woman too lightly to be won? Right willingly then he laid his stakes and followed Dan Cupid's call.

The next time Lady Esdaile summoned her husband he did not appear. He regretted deeply his inability to obey her, but he had another engagement. Her ladyship was anxious. Were her tactics, then, all misdirected? If so, how retrieve the mistake? She foreboded failure.

Great, then, was her surprise to learn from Lady Betty Acton that her husband had pledged himself to win her favour within the space of three weeks. Could this mean that her scheme had succeeded?—that she having won his affections, he was now seeking hers? It was clear that Lady Betty interpreted it thus, to judge by the meaning look this arch-conspirator cast at her when she announced the fact; but Myra saw certain reasons for doubting the truth of this surmise.

Nevertheless, the fact of the wager remained incontrovertible.

Myra lent most vehement support to Miss Pamela Plunkett's scheme of resistance: she would show this husband of hers that forgiveness and favour are not so easily won. Oh! he should woo long ere she would again yield her heart to his keeping. And if her eyes brightened and her lips smiled unwittingly as she thought how pleasant

the wooing perchance would prove, her resolution of prolonging it was by no means shaken. Among the adamantine hearts that left Lady Betty's room that day, none were more sternly fortified than Lady Esdaile's.

But, alas! the next few days brought no repentant husband suing for her favour,—brought no change at all, in fact. Sir Antony indeed frequented society more than formerly, was present wherever she went, but only to pay his devoirs to other women. He continued to avoid her as assiduously as before. Myra was angry and amazed. What manner of wooing was this?

Lady Betty watched events with undisguised eagerness. For had not Sir Antony Esdaile told his wife that he had married her for her fortune? Yet never had he given her one moment's cause to believe it true. She judged this man worth the watching, likely to show much sport. Breathless with interest, she awaited what should befall.

As for Sir Antony, he went his way quietly, speaking of his affairs to none. Turning neither to the right hand nor to the left, he pursued his chosen path, heedless of the world's tattle. For here was a woman, beautiful, loving, and defiant, waiting for his conquest: what man had turned from the task? Life had a new zest for him. The blood of adventure coursed merrily through his veins; he was ripe for a frolic, and Dan Cupid whispered to him many words of wisdom as he shuffled his cards and prepared to play for the greatest stake a man may wager.

Five days passed, and not a word. Myra washed her hands of husbands, and prepared to throw herself wholeheartedly into the joys of her masquerade fixed for that evening.

This masquerade was a marvel of luxury and taste, designed to prove one of the finger-posts of Society to mark the season of 1712. Thither came all the world and her husband, save one. The master of the house, alone unbidden, sat apart in his room, listening to the distant sounds of the revels, awaiting with a quiet smile in his eyes the hour when the curtain should rise upon the comedy which he and Dan Cupid designed to produce.

At length his patience was rewarded. Hurried steps ran

along the corridor, the door was flung violently open, and his wife in all the glory of her masquerade costume, a miracle of brocade and jewels, burst into the room.

"Antony!" she gasped breathlessly, "you must come below instantly. The most terrible things are toward."

Antony rose slowly to his feet and gazed at his wife with undisguised admiration. Her masquerade costume was the perfection of art: the flush of excitement or anger enhanced, if that were possible, the perfection of Nature. She read his look, and paused for a moment in the enjoyment of her triumph, then rushed breathlessly into her story.

"It is monstrous," she cried furiously. "Think, Antony, our guests are just sat down to supper——"

"Our guests?" he queried politely.

Myra flushed angrily.

"I—I am holding a masquerade here to-night," she faltered.

"Ah! I thought I heard sounds of arrival. A pleasant party, I trust?"

She chafed at his coolness.

"All the world is here—it's the success of the season. And we had but just gone down to supper when creatures calling themselves bailiffs appeared, and—and—they will not allow any one to have anything to eat."

He turned suddenly to hide a smile. This was a detail he had not bargained for, a perfect trimming to his jest. Isaacs was a wonderful fellow, a friend in every need.

Myra stamped with impatience.

"Do you hear, Antony?" she cried angrily.

He turned and faced her, playing carelessly with the lid of his snuff-box.

"A most distressing affair, madame. I trust, under the circumstances, your guests are not hungry."

She clenched her hands in a fury.

"Oh! Go instantly, and drive them from the house."

"Your wishes are my commands, madame," he answered gallantly, moving towards the door, "though I myself should have advocated a less severe remedy. To drive your guests from the house, even though they be hungry, appears——"

"Heaven preserve us! not the guests—the creatures, the bailiffs!"

He stopped and came slowly back to the hearth where she stood.

"The bailiffs! Ah! that is another matter. Alas! that any request of yours should be impossible."

"Impossible! Do you mean that the wretches have a right to be in here?"

"It would certainly seem they have taken possession."

"But—but can't you drive them out?"

He shook his head gravely. "It is mere folly to fight against the power of the law."

"Then can you do nothing?"

"Nothing, madame."

Myra gazed at him in desperation.

"But something must be done! Think of the scandal! It is monstrous! It will be all over the town in a day."

"In an hour."

"Oh! you must do something. Go and do something, anything, if this be really true. It should be simple. Pass it off as a hoax. Make some little pleasantry."

"Gad! madame, I'm gratified at your estimate of my wit. But, 'pon my soul, I cannot for the moment recollect any jest likely to appeal infallibly to the humour of three hundred hungry guests."

"Well, you must try. If one fails another may succeed. Make several pleasantries."

His lips twitched at the proposal.

"Alas! madame, you should have married a mountebank. I confess myself unequal to the task. 'The feast of reason' is satisfying only to the full stomach."

Myra seated herself elaborately in his chair.

"You must do something," she said resolutely.

"Pardon the suggestion, madame, but they are your guests."

"It is your house," she answered defiantly.

"True. I am amazed at your recollection of the fact."

He hesitated. She turned to him with a sudden pleading gesture:

"Oh, please, Antony, go and send them all away. I

cannot endure to see them again. The scandal will be horrible."

For a moment a look of pity came into his eyes; but he banished it with a laugh. What place is there for pity when Dan Cupid rules the heart?

"I will do my best," he said lightly. "If they will not go we can at least call in the watch. But may I entreat you to stay here till I return,—I have something to say to you."

"And I to you," she answered defiantly.

He smiled ruefully at the threatening tone of her voice, and hurried out of the room.

Myra followed him to the door and listened. The babel of voices in the supper-room below ceased suddenly. She heard her husband speaking in low easy tones. Two or three eager questions followed, again Sir Antony's voice. Then a loud burst of laughter. The babel of chat broke out again, and the sounds were soon increased by the shouting of link-boys, the rattling of coaches in the square without, all that commotion which ever accompanies the departure of a multitude.

So her husband had succeeded! Lady Myra flushed with pleasure and pride; then recollecting the cause of the departure, she frowned, and took up a commanding position in the centre of the room, preparatory to his return.

Presently he came to her, gay and debonair.

"Your guests have departed to sup at Vauxhall, where I have still a trifle of credit. Their only regret is that their hostess will not be of the party."

"And now," cried the said hostess, in her most icy tones, "will you inform me what is the meaning of this?"

Sir Antony crossed to a still more commanding position,—the Briton's castle,—his hearthrug.

"Gad! madame, it means that your husband is no common mortal. It is not given to every man to be ruined twice in six months."

"Ruined?"

"Alas! madame, those adorable gowns which have delighted the town this season, these perfect entertainments which have—er—I trust—delighted you—must, in this ill-

ordered world, be paid for. It needed but that Fortune (doubtless in revenge for the—er—insult I have offered to the fairest of her sex)—it needed but that she should turn her back upon me for a night or so,—the deed is done.'

Myra turned slowly and stared at him.

"Do you mean to say, that after wedding me for my fortune, you have gambled with my money and dared—dared to lose it? Oh, no! it's impossible."

"I anticipated your anger, madame, but hardly your surprise. I had thought from some remarks you let fall a few days since that you were fully acquainted with the character of your husband."

Lady Myra spread out her hands with a despairing gesture as though bidding the gods look down and behold this monster in the guise of man.

"When did you know of your ruin?" she asked sharply.

"Some little time since. A seizure is usually preceded by certain formalities."

"And why did you not tell me sooner?"

He shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"I awaited your ladyship's permission to address you."

"You should at least have prevented its occurring to-night, at my masquerade."

"But you did not inform me that you intended such an entertainment," he answered coolly.

She flushed and bit her lip.

"What shall you do?" she asked, after a pause.

Sir Antony drew up a chair and invited his wife to sit. She refused haughtily, so he leant on the back of it, and looked at her with a quiet smile.

"What shall I do?" he echoed slowly. "I have given some consideration to the matter, and come at length to a clear resolve. Were I not that most enviable of men, your husband, my course would be simple. I would without hesitation——"

"Marry, I presume," snapped Myra.

"Egad! madam, not a second time. I entreat you, credit me some prudence. Experience is a sharp teacher, but her lessons are not so lightly forgot." He laughed bitterly, and she turned away with an angry flush.

"No, madam," he continued quietly; "were I a bachelor I would have one more thing with fortune—and failing, would pay the penalty with a worthless life. As it is, having the—er—happiness of being wed to your ladyship, I have no alternative,—I must work."

"Work!"

"I appreciate your sympathy. It is indeed a monstrous unpleasant necessity."

"What are you going to do?" she asked again.

"That has been a difficult question to decide. The divines tell us that every man should work; Nature gives the lie to that by neglecting to provide work for every man. I ought by rights to be provided with some comfortable post under the Ministry; but, being of the Opposite party, there is no hope of that. This damned peace has ruined the army. In short, I find there is but one occupation for which I am really fitted."

"And that is——?"

"A keeper and forester. I have had enough experience in woodcraft down on my own estate,—also during the years I spent with my uncle in Virginia. One of the king's foresters at Ashridge has lately died, and I have been so fortunate as to obtain the appointment from the Earl of Bridgewater, my very good friend. The work will be quite within my powers, the wages are sufficient, and I hear the—er—cottage provided is in excellent repair. On the whole, I am to be congratulated on my success: not every man of my education could be—a forester."

Lady Esdaile at last relinquished her commanding position, and sank despairingly into a chair. Her world was tottering in a most unprecedented and unpleasant manner.

"Do you mean to imply," she gasped, staring at him in horror, "that you expect me—*me*—to go down to the country and live in a cottage all by myself in the middle of a forest?"

"Certainly not, madam; I trust to share the cottage with you—for many happy years."

"But I refuse! I utterly refuse to do such a monstrous, such an unheard-of thing!"

"Alas! madam, the law, manifestly unfair to women, gives the husband control over the person of his wife."

"Would you compel me to go with you?"

"I should mourn the compulsion. But whereas to a rich man a wife may be a luxury, to a poor man she is a necessity."

"What do you mean?"

"Why, madame, who else should cook his meals?"

"Cook his meals!" Never were three words repeated with more horrified amazement.

"A man must eat, and even in the wilderness he prefers his meals cooked. We set out at six o'clock to-morrow. Let me entreat you to rest now; we have a long day before us. I will speak to your woman before she departs, to pack such things as will be needful. I propose to send our mails on ahead with Jarvis."

He gave his directions in a calm matter-of-fact tone that excluded all argument, and then promptly conducted his wife to her room before she had sufficiently recovered from her amazement to make any further protest. He left her with renewed entreaties that she would rest.

Left alone in her room, Myra sat for some time motionless, staring about her, trying to realise the extraordinary change that was coming into her life. To her surprise she did not feel particularly unhappy, only amazed, and filled with the pleasurable excitement that a child feels at the prospect of novelty.

At length she roused herself, and, crossing to her bureau, began to hunt among some old papers. Presently she drew thence a soberly bound 'Book of Cookery,' which her aunt had presented to her on her marriage. Idly she turned the leaves, while the wonder grew in her eyes, and a mystic smile hovered round her lips. Then, being very tired, she went to bed, and fell asleep with the cookery book under her pillow.

For woman is a mysterious creature. To a woman in love, poetry and romance lie clear to view, even in the prosaic pages of a cookery book.

VI.

At five o'clock next morning Sir Antony himself brought his wife her chocolate, and exhorted her to prepare quickly for her ride, as they must start punctually.

Still all amazement, still hovering betwixt defiance and submission, Myra dressed herself, and went downstairs to join her husband. The house looked strangely deserted; no servants appeared. The sun streamed in through the cracks of the shutters, lighting up the rooms still littered with traces of the evening's revels. As she passed an open window on the staircase the fresh morning air blew in upon her, and she heard the birds singing in the square.

In the hall she found Sir Antony awaiting her. He was dressed in a rough suit of fustian, perfect indeed in cut, and with irreproachable linen, but so different from his ordinary attire (almost dandified in its perfection) that she started at sight of him, and experienced the first shock of realism in her bewildered dream.

She paused at the foot of the stairs, and looked doubtfully at her husband.

"I do not know whether I will go with you," she said bluntly.

"It is quite time we set out; the horse is ready," he answered coolly.

She took two or three steps towards the door, then stopped.

"Lady Betty Acton would give me hospitality," she mused.

"While I can work, my wife does not accept the charity of strangers," he answered, opening the door.

A blaze of sunlight streamed into the hall; Myra gave a little gasp of pleasure, and drew nearer to the door.

"You have no right to take me away into the wilderness like this," she protested angrily. "I am alone now, with no brother, no father—to protect me; you have taken a cruel advantage of my helplessness."

"Is anything to be gained by delay?" he asked politely.

His coolness enraged her.

"It is intolerable!" she cried. "You have married me under false pretences, squandered my fortune, spoilt my life. And now you expect me to go away with you into the wilderness and work for you. The idea is monstrous! Nothing would induce me to do such a thing."

He did not answer, but unhitched his horse's reins from a ring by the door, and tested the stirrup. Myra noticed, with another little shock of realism, that they had only one horse, saddled with a pillion. Evidently they were to travel like a country man and his wife jogging away to market. She stamped her foot, impatient at his silence.

"Do you understand?" she cried. "I am not going with you."

He turned deliberately and faced her.

"What is that book you are carrying?" he asked irrelevantly, doubting what argument were best to use to conquer her defiance. To his surprise the anger suddenly died out of her face, she blushed crimson, and her eyelids drooped.

"It—it is a cookery book," she stammered.

A sudden smile lighted his eyes.

"I think you had better let me mount you," he said gently. Without another word she submitted to be lifted to the saddle, and they set out upon their journey.

A ride out into the country at six o'clock on a perfect July day is not conducive to depression. As they gradually left behind them the quiet London streets, just waking into life, and came out into the heath, where every living creature was voicing "the pure joy of living," Myra found her spirits rising buoyantly, and much to her chagrin she caught herself half unconsciously humming a song. Her husband took up the refrain, whereat she stopped abruptly, and, sitting stiffly upright, almost released her hold round his waist. But at every attempt on her part to do so, and to draw back from him, the horse indulged in some disconcerting caracole, and she was again obliged to steady herself by her companion. She saw through the manœuvre perfectly, and chafed at her helplessness, and at his daring to take such cunning advantage of it. But even while she stirred up her anger against him, so treacherous is the influence of sunny morning air and country breezes upon the

spirits, she had to bite her lips to keep in the exasperated laughter which woke in her heart at this man's audacity.

So they rode. Here and there they passed the homes of cottagers, saw the men setting out to their work, the women waving farewell from the door or less romantically busying themselves about their housework, while the rosy-checked children played on the doorstep. Myra looked at these homes with a sudden, new interest. She felt a strange sense of fellowship with the dwellers therein. For she, too, was now one of them.

At one of the cottages they stopped to break their fast. She looked round the little room with a wondering curiosity, with a humble feeling of uselessness and inexperience, marvelling to think that such a place was now to be her home. Cottage life is very sweet—to the onlooker! The tiny place breathed the spirit of love and peace and quiet happiness. Myra stooped to kiss the baby at parting, and when he lifted her again to the saddle her husband noted that there were tears in her eyes, and a new gentleness in her glance.

At noon they stopped for an hour to rest in a little wood. As she lay on the moss and stared up at the arching trees above her, all the sweet country sights and sounds carried her thoughts away to her childhood in the West. For a time she half repented her sulkiness, and leant nearer her husband when they again set out upon their way. A word of repentance, of apology from him, and she would have surrendered. But Sir Antony Esdaile had no intention of apologising. The surrender must be unconditional, or he would have none of it.

Presently he began to sing as they rode, a merry song concerning Chloe's Disdain. Myra judged such joyance most ill-timed.

"You are pleased to be merry," she said coldly, for she had ridden many hours in silence, and her tongue ached to be at work.

"And wherefore not?" he answered buoyantly. "Here am I with a lovely world around me, a good horse beneath me, a fair wife beside me, and, let us hope, a comfortable home before me. What more could man desire?"

"It is well you are content," she answered bitterly.

"Content is a poor man's privilege. I wouldn't for the world forego it. Your rich man can afford to be discontented. He can change his lot if he chooses. But for your poor man, his lot is fixed, he can but spice it with contentment."

"And your poor woman, can she be content?"

He shook his head.

"I doubt whether even poverty will teach a woman to desire that which she may not have."

"What then remains for her?"

"Gad! She can learn to appreciate that which she already possesses," he answered bluntly, and whipped up his horse.

But Myra was very angry, and spoke no more.

So they rode, and as evening fell they passed through the little town of Berkhamsted, and a few miles farther drew rein before a tiny four-roomed cottage at the edge of the forest of Ashridge.

Behind it loomed the dark shadow of the trees, before it stretched the wide heath-land. It would have been difficult to find, within a ride from town, a more beautiful or a more lonely spot. No house stood within two miles of the cottage, no living being was near save the wild creatures of the forest.

To this wilderness Sir Antony Esdaile had brought his wife. For he was resolved to stake his life's happiness on a single throw, playing with true gambler's instinct to win or lose all; and it seemed to him that two human beings living together in such loneliness, uncompassed by these wild expanses of Nature, with no other company to distract or console, must of a surety learn either to love each other—or to hate.

That night, long after Myra, half asleep with weariness, had gone to her room, he sat at his open door and looked out over the moon-kissed heath, dreaming of the future. And as he dreamed, his eyes smiled with anticipated triumph, his heart burned high with hope. For it was not hate that the forest whispered,—not hate that was breathed by the soft, cool breeze bearing the countless

scents of the heath; not hate that was voiced by the mysterious sounds and silences of the night; not Hate, but Love, Love, Love.

VII.

Myra slept late the next morning, much to her husband's satisfaction. He had many matters to settle with Jarvis, his invaluable but scandalised valet, who had preceded his master to the cottage and prepared for his reception. Jarvis had followed his master into many strange places, had attended him through many strange adventures, but never had he been commanded to assist in such a mad freak as this. After preparing breakfast and receiving final instructions, he reluctantly departed, shaking his head with bitter foreboding, doubtful whether his master meant to turn hermit or to murder his wife. To Jarvis's Cockney eyes, such a fashion-forsaken country could only be resorted to for one or other of these equally distressing alternatives.

Myra came down soon after his departure. She looked curiously round the little room destined to be her home, and at her husband devouring his meal with true country appetite. She felt she must be surely dreaming, but she had no particular desire to awaken. It even occurred to her, as she looked out over the glowing heath, that if her husband would but take her in his arms and kiss her, even as he had done one glorious morning but three months ago, when first they had plighted troth, then the dream would be so perfect she would pray never to wake again.

But though Sir Antony rose at her entrance, poured out her chocolate, waited upon her with all his accustomed gallantry, he gave her no word of greeting, and his eyes never once met hers.

Presently he rose, took up his hat, and turned to the door.

"I must get to work," he said briefly. "I will be back for dinner at noon."

Without another word he strode away into the wood.

Myra inspected her new domain and wondered what to

do next. She stared at the cups and plates on the table, and slowly it dawned on her that such things must be washed. The dream vanished suddenly.

Some women would have sat down and wept, but such a proceeding never occurred to her. She considered it beneath her dignity to condescend to weep over any attack of hostile fortune, however disagreeable. Moreover, she was young and energetic, and filled with a woman's intense desire for daintiness and order in her surroundings, no matter with what sacrifice it must be obtained. Reluctantly she filled a tub, turned up her sleeves, and with a little grimace of disgust set about her task.

Presently a shadow darkened the doorway. She looked up and saw her husband watching her with a new expression on his face. It was not only admiration for her beauty, but something deeper, tenderer,—that look which dawns in a man's eyes when first he beholds the woman he loves making his house a home. She had laughed triumphantly at his admiration; before this look she dropped her eyes and blushed.

He crossed to her side and laid a bunch of wild-flowers on the table.

"Your ladyship must not miss your bouquet," he said, "even though Covent Garden can no longer yield its spoils to do you honour."

Then he looked doubtfully round the room.

"Er—don't tire yourself, Myra," he said abruptly.

Myra blushed. "Someone must tidy the place," she said, as though justifying her occupation. "Ought not you to go and do your work—whatever that may be?"

He started, and, with a muttered explanation of his sudden return, hurried out again into the forest. There, to justify himself in his own eyes, he worked right valiantly for three hours hacking down a dead tree, and returned to his dinner with ravenous appetite.

He found his wife flushed, ruffled, ill-at-ease, glancing with looks of mingled pride and anxiety at a stolid pasty adorning the centre of the table. Directly he put his knife into it he understood. He threw a quick, humorous glance in her direction.

Myra fidgetted with her plate and gazed absently out of the window.

Antony Esdaile was a brave man, furthermore a hungry one. He helped himself to a large portion of the pasty and attacked it valiantly.

Myra watched his proceedings with satisfaction. After the second mouthful he laid down his knife and sighed. Again he looked inquiringly at his wife. Her face was grave—not even the suggestion of a twinkle brightened her eyes. He renewed the attack and struggled with another mouthful, then, with a sad shake of his head, gave up in despair.

Myra flushed crimson with disappointment.

"I am afraid," she said coldly, "my pasty is not quite what it should be."

"I rejoice, madame," he said drily, "even while eating your pasty, I rejoice that we have at last found one subject of agreement. Henceforth, when all other subjects fail us, let us discuss—in theory—your ladyship's pasty."

There are certain occasions, though no man yet was ever clear-sighted enough to realise the fact, when a woman will bear anything rather than ridicule. Myra was prepared for her husband to be angry or scornful of her first attempt at cookery, she was not prepared for him to laugh at it.

"When I married you I did not anticipate being reduced to cooking my husband's dinner," she said crossly.

"Nor when I married you did I contemplate being reduced to dining off my wife's cookery," he responded good-humouredly.

"You are not dining off it," said Myra, glancing aggrievedly at the neglected pasty. "You don't know what a monstrous time it has taken me to make that. If you think you can cook better yourself, do so."

"By all means," he said, springing up with alacrity. "I was reckoned a very passable chef when camping out in Virginia. I think my hand has not yet lost its cunning. You go and sit out in the sunshine while I grill some chops. Unless," he added smiling, "you would prefer to eat your pasty."

"Thank you, I am not hungry," answered Myra haughtily, and she walked out on to the heath.

She sat on a log in the blazing sunshine and stared angrily at the forest. It was unpardonable that her husband should not only laugh at her cookery, but also be independent of it. A man had clearly no right to be able to cook for himself. It placed his wife in such a ridiculous position. He had no need of her. She might as well go back to London and seek shelter with Lady Betty Acton. Her husband would not miss her. She sat and sighed over her forlorn condition.

Presently she rose and looked in at the window. Her husband was busy in his shirt-sleeves, grilling chops over the fire. Manlike he had strewn tables, chairs, and floor with plates, knives, and pans.

"What a monstrous untidy mess you are making," said Myra scornfully.

He laughed cheerily, without lifting his head, and Myra walked back again to her log.

She looked out over the heath and felt forlorn. All around her the busy hum of Nature stirred. Birds darted hither and thither catching the insects, themselves equally bent on prey. A stream of virtuous and heavily laden ants wound across the path. A kingfisher hovered meditatively over the stream, while ever the sermonising buzz of the admirable bee drowsed through the air. Even the butterflies wore an air of importance in their aimless flittings to and fro. It seemed to Myra that every living creature save only herself had its place, its work in the world; she alone sat idle in the sunlight, useless and unwanted. So forlorn did her lot appear that two tears slowly welled over her eyelashes and trickled down her cheeks.

But the taste of the salt tears on her lips brought her back to her senses with a sudden shock. It was never the way of Myra Hornyold to sit and weep over her griefs. She came of a stock too sturdy, too sensible, for that. The only lesson her father had taught her, the only virtue he had demanded of her, was courage, but that he had insisted upon from earliest infancy. Courage was her one ideal, the one principle to which she clung. But here was small

courage to sit in the sunlight and weep over an ill which could be remedied. She blushed at her weakness, calling herself "coward" unmercifully. She wiped away her tears, pulled herself together, and looked out upon life with less prejudiced eyes than she had hitherto turned upon herself and her wrongs.

The result of her meditations was very simple. Here was she, by the maltreatment of the Fates, married to a villain. There was no escape from that. But it is manifest cowardice to weep over the maltreatment of the Fates. She could not obviously be happy in the fact, but she could at least meet it bravely and do her duty in that extraordinary state of life into which it had pleased her husband to bring her. And if she was incapable of fulfilling her duties, why, then she must humble her pride and learn.

So she laudably resolved. It is only regrettable that the very sturdiness of character which gave resolution to her courage, gave stubbornness to her pride and blinded her eyes to the fact that her villain husband's crimes might be conceivably less than she chose to imagine.

She rose from her seat in a state of great exaltation and marched back to the cottage. She found her husband enjoying a hearty meal after the throes of cooking it.

It was a decided shock. A woman can never quite understand a man's extraordinary commingling of the material and the emotional. When a woman wishes to indulge in emotions she usually refuses to eat anything, but very few men can be emotional until after a good dinner: even in the crisis of a tragedy a man will be hungry, while for the cooling of love's passion in the manly heart there is nothing so sure as an empty stomach.

Fortunately Myra's resolution was too new to be shaken by this proof of man's callousness. Moreover, the dinner smelt temptingly. She crossed to her husband's side and stood rather like a naughty child making confession.

"I am sorry," she said humbly, "that I cannot cook for you. I will try to learn."

Antony looked up in amazement. He could not understand this sudden submission. He was not prepared for it.

"Oh!—ah!—er—don't trouble, Myra," he stammered. "I wager I can do the work for both of us."

"I wish to do it," said Myra virtuously. "It is my duty."

Antony stifled a groan. Things have indeed come to evil pass when a woman talks of her duty.

But the Fates proved less cruel than he at first feared. Myra was too healthy a creature, had too strong a desire for happiness, to perform her duty for long with that sourness of a meannour usually considered inseparable from the part. She graciously permitted him to entertain her throughout the meal, and half-unconsciously melted sufficiently to respond pleasantly to his attentions. Later in the day she so far humbled her pride as to ask his instructions in the preparation of supper.

Her request rather nonplussed him. But as the natural lordliness of man ever loves the opportunity to instruct woman in her own affairs, he did not draw back from the task.

"Egad! Myra, I'm no 'cordon bleu' myself," he confessed magnanimously, "but what I can do, you shall learn."

So that evening Myra took her first lesson in the culinary art, without some attention to which no woman can hope to keep perpetual hold over the affections of her husband. For man comes of a hungry race, and it is not to be doubted that even Adam, on occasion, grumbled about the over-ripeness of his apples, or the dryness of his nuts.

So together they struggled with the intricacies of supper, she every moment hastening in search of fresh utensils or ingredients, he holding the handle of the pot and giving directions, according to the most approved division of labour on such occasions. Hot, but triumphant, they at length sat down to their meal, and the pride of their combined success drew them into quite a friendly harmony, so that they sat far on into the night, before their cottage door, watching the moon turn the golden heath to a pale silver, and gossiping over their acquaintance as married people use.

It seemed to Antony, sitting there in the quiet peace of the evening, that his task was already nearly accom-

plished. But presently his wife bade him good-night, and withdrew to her own chamber, and he knew the victory was not yet complete: the outworks might be gained, but the citadel yet defied conquest.

VIII.

Now for some days Arcadian peace reigned in the cottage. July is the month of months for the forest, and Dame Nature was kind,—no rain came to remind these comedians of muddy roads and other unpleasant realities of country life.

The days passed happily for Myra, busy with her new work: unconsciously the trouble lifted from her heart, and she looked forward to a life passed in the cottage with no fear,—rather with a sweet inexplicable anticipation of greater happiness to come.

But Sir Antony Esdaile was frankly bored. All through the day he wandered down the green rides or sat on fallen trees, and struggled against his utter boredom. For how should a man look forward cheerfully to an unlimited time, cut off from civilisation and his club, with no entertainment, no work, no companionship save a dutiful and submissive wife? For none who have not experienced it can understand the excessive aggravation of a submissive wife. There he was resolved to stay until he should have fulfilled the task he had in hand, but his task seemed daily no nearer fulfilment. He sought a token of his wife's favour; of what value the favour won from a dutiful wife? Such give without surrender. He had bargained for love or hate; here was neither the one nor the other, so it seemed—only submission. But he did not want submission, he did not care a jot for duty, he wanted her love; he wanted her as truly his as in the first days of their wedded life.

He was in despair. He would have stolen away for a night in town on some pretext, he would have amused himself with such sport as the forest afforded; but it was a point of honour with him not to do so. The

life to which he had condemned his wife he would himself live, the amusements of which he had deprived her he too would forego. If he played a part to gain his ends, he would play it to the full.

So he roamed through the forest paths, yawning with weariness. For even if he gave up the struggle, how was he to explain to his still unconquered wife the hoax he had played upon her? And what manner of life might he expect with her, after he had made that explanation.

In his heart he cursed Dan Cupid for bringing him to such a pass.

He had again recourse to trickery.

"Myra, I want your help," he called to her one evening, as he sat outside the cottage waiting her coming.

Obediently she hurried to his side.

"A debt falls due in three days, Myra; you must help me to pay it."

"A debt! Must it be paid?"

"A debt of honour."

"For how much?"

"A hundred guineas."

Myra started, and looked at him suspiciously.

"Is it a wager?" she asked sharply.

"With Wildmore."

"Have you then lost it?" she asked again, with a queer look in her eyes.

"I have. Unless you will permit me to win it, and so free me from the debt."

Myra saw the trap, and frowned.

"You want a token of my favour," she said coldly. Then she added with a depressing air of dutifulness: "I suppose, sir, you can take what you wish."

"Take! yes; but this must be given, Myra."

"If I give anything——" she began.

"It is a debt of honour."

She nodded. "Then it must be paid."

"How can I pay £100?"

She sighed at their poverty. "It must, then, be redeemed," she said slowly.

"You will, Myra?" he cried eagerly.

"It is a purely business affair," she answered coldly. "It must be redeemed, or paid; but—there are still three days. Who knows but a hundred guineas may appear from somewhere ere the debt fall due?"

Antony glanced at her sharply; but her face betrayed no suspicion of a special meaning in her words. She walked past him and strolled into the forest.

The wood looked dreary; in a minute he rose and followed her.

He had not gone far when he saw her running towards him, casting frightened, furtive glances behind her. At sight of him she quickened her pace and ran up to him, clinging to his arm breathless, terrified.

Antony was surprised. He knew his wife no martyr to nerves. He had seen her part two savage dogs, he had seen her master a horse that it required no common nerve to mount, he had even seen her regard with equanimity the crawling creatures of the forest. He felt suspicious of this sudden fear. Nevertheless, nothing loath, he put his arms about her, and she crouched still closer to his side.

"Why, what in Heaven's name, Myra——?" he exclaimed, staring in amazement down the empty path.

"Oh!" she gasped, "there—there was an animal."

"An animal! A cow?" he suggested, recollecting that great exciter of feminine fears.

"No, of course not!" cried Myra indignantly. "A—a wild animal."

"A wild animal! Nonsense! A hare!"

Myra drew back from his embrace.

"I think it was a wolf," she said with dignity.

"A wolf! Tut, tut! How careless of King Edgar."

Myra resented the twinkle in his eye.

"It would seem you do not believe that I have seen anything," she said aggrievedly.

"On the contrary; I wish you could see it—frequently," he answered with meaning, and his arm tightened round her.

Suddenly he started. "What the devil——?"

Myra turned quickly. "Yes, yes!" she cried. "There it is. Oh! Tony, what is it?"

A dark form was creeping quickly through the undergrowth which bordered the path. Antony broke from his wife's detaining hand and strode towards it. The creature rose upright and began to run, breaking into the open path. It was a woman.

Antony shouted and set off in pursuit, and Myra, after a moment's hesitation, followed.

The woman ran fast, but she was already exhausted; her pursuer gained at every step. At the end of the ride she turned suddenly and stood at bay, a knife gleaming in her hand.

"I'll kill 'ee if 'ee dare to touch me," she gasped.

Without a moment's hesitation Esdaile closed with her, and easily twisted the knife from her grasp. With the loss of her weapon all her courage vanished: she crouched at his feet—a pitiable object of terror.

"Oh! don't 'ee give me up. Don't 'ee give me up," she moaned, clutching his knees.

"What's the matter with you, woman?" he asked irritably. He felt hopelessly foolish with a woman clinging to his feet, and by this time Myra had arrived upon the scene.

The woman glanced round furtively.

"They've a warrant out against me," she gasped. "I'm to be put i' t' tumbriel."

"The tumbriel? The ducking-stool? What have you been doing?"

"Nothing," she asserted, with a touch of defiance.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh! that goes without saying, of course. But what's the accusation?"

The woman flushed darkly.

"They say I'm a scold," she muttered.

Antony gave a low laugh of amusement. He tilted up the woman's face and looked at her curiously. Doubtless the accusation was true. She was a pretty creature, but the sour lines round her mouth, the black eyebrows meeting above her eyes, betokened her character. Moreover, the fury with which she had faced him showed her temper.

"Yes," he said thoughtfully. "I daresay you are a very passable scold, my dear."

Myra watched her with that anger which is usually the reaction from a fright.

"A scold!" she cried scornfully. "They cannot punish a woman for that!"

"Egad! Yes, they can, Myra," interrupted her husband, bent on improving the shining hour. "Witches, scolds, and undutiful wives may all be sent for a ducking."

Myra opened her eyes in amazement. This new world in which she found herself had queer ways with women. She had hitherto been accustomed to believe a woman exempt from all the penalties of the law, defended therefrom by her husband as in duty bound. But here it appeared a woman might be punished for so small a matter as losing her temper and loosing her tongue. It struck her as rather a brutal world. She looked at her husband with a shadow of anxiety in her eyes.

Antony smiled to himself, and pulled the woman to her feet.

"Where is your husband?" he asked.

"My husband?" she repeated dully.

"Yes. Can't he protect you?"

The woman stared. "Why, it's he has got out the warrant," she stammered in amaze.

"The brute!"

Myra eyed her with disfavour. "She must have led him a monstrous poor life to drive him to it," she muttered.

"Maybe not," answered Antony cheerfully. "There is a limit to some men's patience, you know."

Suddenly the woman wheeled round, and the look of terror widened her eyes.

"Hark 'ee!" she cried. "They'm coming. They've followed my tracks."

Far below on the road to Berkhamsted they heard the tramp of feet, shouts, booing, and rough laughter. The woman shuddered.

Esdaile flung up his head at the sound, the fighting light in his eyes. All his forebears, wild border-folk, had been fighting men, mostly defiers of the law.

"It's probably some fool of a country justice," he muttered. "Anyhow, 'tis rank against nature to punish a woman for talking." He turned and strode in the direction of the shouts.

"Take her back into the cottage, Myra," he said briskly. "I'll clear the rabble."

"Oh! What are you going to do?" cried Myra. She was infected by the woman's terror. She had never before been at close quarters with humanity stripped of the polish of an ultra-civilised age; its cheerful brutality frightened her. Women seemed strangely little accounted of in this new world into which she had strayed.

"Go into the cottage," he said again, brusquely, and meekly they obeyed him, running hand-in-hand down the path to the house. Far down the winding road they saw the mob straggling up the hill. They hurried into the house and shut the door.

The woman crouched, terrified, in the far corner of the room, but Myra took her station at the window, and watched with eager, frightened eyes the approach of the crowd. She saw her husband walk a short distance down the road to meet them. She noted the smile on his face and the jauntiness of his step, so different from his customary world-weary air: she marvelled at the change. His very voice, she recollected, had lost its drawl and taken the tone of command.

Antony Esdaile went a few steps down the hill and surveyed the approaching crowd. All the worthy citizens of Berkhamsted appeared to have turned out, not to speak of the rabble of wastrels and 'prentices who brought up the rear. For the tumbril was a much-valued institution in those parts, and either a witch hunt or running a scold to earth was regarded as a pleasing diversion.

There were few women in the throng: they for the most part looked upon the grant of the warrant as a bad precedent, undermining what little shadow of authority over their husbands they might still retain, and endangering the use of their one weapon.

The law-abiding business of the mob was emphasised by the presence of four members of the watch, the parish clerk,

and the gold-laced beadle, who pantingly brought up the rear.

Sir Antony Esdaile stepped into the middle of the path and held up his hand. The procession came to a jumbled halt, and the men stood for a moment looking up into the steady eyes opposing them. Then one of the leaders, a lusty shoemaker, stepped out of the ranks.

"Ha' you seen Bill Podetat's wife, curst Mary?" he asked slowly.

"What do you want with her?" asked Antony.

"Husband's gotten a warrant to douse her i' t' tumbril," answered the man, pointing with his thumb towards a meek-looking little man, who was diligently seeking self-effacement at the edge of the crowd. Esdaile eyed him humorously, wondering what flash of desperate courage had nerved him to so far commit himself as to seek a warrant against his shrewish wife.

"Come, my man," he said good-humouredly, "surely a dashing blade like you isn't afraid of a woman's tongue. Tut! man, why don't you silence her mouth with kisses? They'd prove a better cure than the water of Berkhamsted pond."

The little husband looked round furtively.

"I've ta'en a warrant against her," he said.

"The more fool you. Come, you've scared her enough. Let her be. I'll wager she keeps a silent tongue for the future."

The little man shook his head.

"I've taken a warrant against her," he muttered again.

"Well, what of that?" urged Esdaile impatiently. "You can withdraw the charge. Take her home and make the most of the scare you've given her, like a wise man."

The little man looked more terrified than before.

"No, no!" he said breathlessly. "I've taken a warrant against her."

"He be afeard to take her home now, till her mouth's been silenced by Berkhamsted pond," explained the shoemaker with a jovial wink. "He'd never sleep o' nights again."

By this time the rear part of the crowd was becoming

impatient at the unexpected check, and began to hustle their neighbours forward. "Get forrard," they shouted impatiently. "Where's the wench? Where's curst Mary?"

A sour-faced smith shouldered his way to the front. "Do you know where the wench is?" he asked threateningly.

"I know several things, my friend," answered Esdaile grimly, "and one is, that you come no farther up this road."

A low growl of anger rose from the mob. The blacksmith brandished his stick menacingly. "Out o' my way," he shouted.

Esdaile stood his ground and eyed the crowd contemptuously.

"I'm keeper of her Majesty's forests," he said coolly, "and I'll keep all vermin out. Back to your kennels, fools. If you must have play with your damned tumbril, douse that woman-hearted husband yonder. Stand back, there."

The men paused doubtfully. The steady glance, the voice of authority, checked them. For the day had not yet dawned when every man should hold himself better than his neighbour. The claim of Race still won submission. They stood irresolute. Here was a man, to all appearances a common forester—one of themselves, yet he spoke with the air of one born to command, of one with power, if need be, to enforce his commands.

The parish clerk shook his head solemnly. "Let none put asunder a man and his lawful wedded wife," he said, with a dim idea of bringing all the law at his disposal to bear on the situation.

His words reassured the crowd. Though their opponent might speak with the air and voice of authority, they had the Scriptures and the Prayer-book on their side. Their law-abiding bosoms swelled with pride.

"Out o' the way, there," cried the smith, stepping up to Esdaile and brandishing his weapon.

Antony's temper rose,—he was little accustomed to opposition.

"Out of the way yourself, dolt," he said grimly; and

then, not waiting for further argument or threat, whirled up his stick, beat aside the smith's weapon, and dealt him a blow that sent him staggering back on his supporters.

An angry shout rose from the mob. Esdaile's blood danced with the joy of battle. "Do any more of you want a taste of my staff?" he asked exultantly.

Suddenly the crowd parted, and the gold-laced beadle marched to the front.

"Tut, tut! What's this?" he cried, holding up his staff. "Have a care, you, sir! Have a care! Stand aside and let the law run its course, or maybe you'll find yourself none too free from its grasp."

The four men of the watch rallied importantly round their chief; the parish clerk nodded approval of every word; the crowd stood back admiringly and watched this arm of the law pursuing his duty.

Antony Esdaile, a justice of the peace in his own county, recognised that in a measure the beadle had right on his side: he deemed that fair words were more advisable than blows, in the present instance. He lowered his staff.

"Ah! provost," he said genially. "Is that you? Harkee, then, call off the rabble and let the woman free for once. What, man, do you think her Majesty would blame you for sparing a woman? I wager the wench is scared enough. Call off your hounds."

The beadle stared at him open-mouthed. Then he drew himself up pompously.

"I don't know who you may happen to be, my man, who makes so free with her Majesty's name. But it's not for the like of you to stand in the way of the law. Step aside, step aside, and let be."

"Come, come, Mr Provost," said Esdaile good-humouredly. "I happen to be Sir Antony Esdaile; the Earl of Bridgewater is my very good friend. Let me have my way, and he shall hear of it. I wager he will know how to reward a man of your discretionary powers."

The beadle eyed the speaker contemptuously. "A likely tale," he said with a sneer.

Antony started. He looked down at his rough fustian

coat and smiled. "Plague take the powers of dress!" he muttered drily. "It is evident the Piccadilly cut isn't recognised down here. What a miracle lies in a velvet coat! A lackey in a stolen suit would pass better than I. Come, Mr Provost," he urged, "beware lest your judicial eyes blind your worldly insight. It is true for the moment I am—or—masquerading in a new part, but I'm none the less Sir Antony Esdaile. The Earl shall hear of this from me."

The beadle openly sniffed. "Very like, very like," he said; "doubtless your lordship will tell the Earl, and my Lord of Oxford, and his Grace of Ormont, and I hope your lordship will speak a word for me with her Majesty when next you take a dish of tea with her. It's not to be doubted your lordship is a very particular friend of her Majesty." He bowed mockingly; the crowd laughed and followed suit; even the parish clerk condescended to a wan smile.

"You old fool!" muttered Esdaile, smiling impatiently at the elephantine gaiety of the beadle. "I'll wager you wouldn't credit her Majesty unless she wore her crown. I can't, of course, prove to you that I'm Sir Antony Esdaile—I can only give you my word. Take it or leave it, as you choose. It's all the same to me."

"Ah! Your lordship can't prove your claim," said the beadle triumphantly, pursuing his jest. "That *is* a pity. Perhaps a night in Berkhamsted jail will help his lordship to find his wits. We can send for her Majesty to come down and bail out her friend in the morning."

Again the crowd laughed enthusiastically. The jests of the law, whether voiced by humble policeman in the exercise of his duty or by sportive Lord Chief-Justice from the majesty of the bench, have always met with a very ready laughter, which doubtless their painstaking nature deserves. But the pleasantry began to pall on Esdaile. He had not reckoned on this refusal to believe in his identity; he had expected that a word from him would be sufficient to disperse the throng. He was not sorry to find that words were not sufficient. The spirit of his law-defying ancestors was strong upon him.

He retreated a few paces to the top of the hill, the narrowest part of the road, and raised his staff.

"Believe what you choose," he said with a yawn. "I've done my best for you, fool—you've had your chance."

"Will your lordship's grace condescend to allow us to pass?" asked the beadle grandiloquently. He was of those who believe that jokes, like friendship, cannot be staled by old acquaintance.

"Not I," said Esdaile cheerfully; "if you want to pass you can move me first."

The beadle judged the hour for pleasantry had passed.

"Arrest the vagabond," he said to the watch, and prudently stepped aside to see the execution of his order.

Esdaile whirled his staff. "Come on!" he cried encouragingly.

The watch came on reluctantly. The road was narrow, bordered on either side by a steep bank. Esdaile had the advantage of the higher ground. The attack was half-hearted, the defence enthusiastic. A swing of his staff across the first man's shins mowed him down like grass. A blow on the head sent the second staggering down the hill, mopping the blood from his eyes. The third man closed with Esdaile, but was speedily deprived of his pike. The fourth man, a prudent soul—shouted.

The powers of the law were discomfited.

But this was more than the law-abiding citizens of Berkhamsted could endure. With an angry growl they closed their ranks and advanced truculently towards their opponent. Only the jovial shoemaker stood apart and muttered: "Fair fight! Fair fight and no favour. Let 'e be."

Esdaile eyed them thoughtfully,—the affair had an ugly look. He retreated a few steps and climbed a little way up the bank at the turn of the road. He was not particularly skilled in quarter-staff play, no equal to these yeomen born and bred to the weapon. He would have given much for a sword. A stick is a poor substitute in the game of cut and thrust.

But he had little time for consideration of consequences.

In another moment they were upon him, and he was hard at work.

Nearly every man was armed with a stick. Esdaile was so far fortunate in this, that, feeling themselves to some extent armed, and comforted by the courage such a knowledge bestows, they forbore to make use of a crowd's deadliest weapon—stones. Furthermore, they so pressed upon one another in the narrow road that it was impossible for them to make full use of their quarter-staffs without belabouring friends as well as foe. But even so, it was quickly clear to Antony that the game was up: in a few minutes the first wild rush would sober down into a combined attack which he could not hope to withstand. Already he was hard put to it to defend his head: he could make no attempt at reprisals. They were hemming him in on all sides. He could no longer hope to hold them out of the cottage; his only remaining alternative was to lead them away from it.

On the instant he resolved upon that course, and carried his resolution into effect. Holding his staff high across his head he rushed down on his opponents, driving them back by the sheer weight and suddenness of the onslaught. Then, darting through the opening he had thus secured, he flung away his staff and set off up the road, past the cottage, at the best pace he could make—the whole mob yelping and howling at his heels.

A few yards past the cottage a track led off into the forest. He turned down this path, pausing a moment to make sure they all followed him. But they had already forgotten their first quarry: here was more spiey sport. Moreover, their blood was up: many of them had been considerably belaboured in the recent scrimmage, either by friend or foe,—it mattered not which,—and they had no mind to let their broken crowns go unavenged. While as to the prudent rear-guard, what so sweet to a rear-guard as the pursuit of a flying foe? One or two farmers' lads raised the "view holloa!" and the crowd yelled joyously an answering shout.

Esdaile ran well: but it was not his object to out-distance his pursuers—only to lead them as far afield as possible.

He knew the paths by heart. Presently he turned to the right and broke out again on to the heath, doubling back towards Berkhamsted.

The last crimson of the sunset flared the western sky ; in the east the clouds were crowding darkly.

Esdaile breathed painfully ; he was nearly at the end of his tether. He was amazed that he had lasted so long, and marvelled what fleetness pursuit will give to a man's legs. He stumbled over an ivy-root and fell prone. In an instant he was on his feet again, and stood at bay. His pursuers were upon him.

No self-respecting Corinthian of those days was ignorant of the ancient and royal game of self-defence, the quick "one, two" of man's primitive weapon—his fists. Esdaile had studied under the renowned Figg, and considered himself an adept in the art. He danced lightly to right and left, his fists rattled gaily against the noses and chins of his opponents, he laughed joyously. All the carefully acquired indifference, all the polish, the cynicism, the affectation of this man of fashion, had miraculously disappeared. Here was he, Antony Esdaile,—leader of the Macaronis, Immaculate of the immaculates,—using his fists in the centre of a brawling crowd, and . . . thoroughly enjoying himself !

It was a glorious fight while it lasted, but it was over in about three minutes. They were too many for him. They surrounded him, they rushed him from behind. He struggled to keep his feet, knowing that should he fall, kicks would be his portion. Then he was pinioned from behind, and gave up the game, resigning himself to receive rough treatment at the hands of his conquerors.

His lot proved better than he expected. The fair-minded shoemaker stood his friend. This patron of the Science clapped him on the back, called him a "spruce blade," commended his prowess, and offered to fight him again for a crown, man to man, when he should be released.

Those of the crowd who had felt Esdaile's fists during the last few minutes were less enthusiastic ; but they contented themselves with tightening the thongs round his

wrists and giving him a few premonitory clouts over the head. Then they set out for home.

His coat tattered and soiled beyond recognition, his forehead cut, his wrists bound tight with leathern straps, his fists braised and bleeding, Sir Antony Esdaile limped down into Berkhamsted, followed by the jeering crowd, who hailed him as his "lordship's grace," and otherwise revived the beadle's highly appreciated jest.

He smiled grimly at the situation, but had no regrets. He had defied the law, enjoyed the fight of his lifetime, and had accomplished his first object: for there would be no more woman-hunting that night—the crowd had had enough. Esdaile felt he had secured a good evening's amusement: he was prepared to pay for it. His only regret was that he dared send no word to his wife,—he could not risk drawing attention to the cottage.

At the foot of the hill they met the beadle, supported by the watch, who scowled aggrievedly beneath their patched and plastered brows. The prisoner was handed over to their custody, and marched away to spend a very unpleasant evening in Berkhamsted jail.

IX.

The following morning Antony Esdaile was brought up before Mr Richard Waterhouse, the squire and bailiff of Berkhamsted.

Mr Richard Waterhouse was an old man—a philosopher in his way—who had taken all the pleasure he could out of life, and now sought to pass the remainder of his time in as peaceful and undisturbed a manner as might be,—the even tenor of his days being interrupted only by those frequent occasions when he paid the necessary penalty for the pleasures of his youth in a bad attack of the gout.

He was so laid by the heels the morning after the brawl on the common, and the prisoner was brought before him in the sunny morning-room at his house in the High Street.

Mr Waterhouse yawned through the beadle's diffuse account of his own prowess, of the prisoner's unheard-of defiance of the law, of his fierce resistance. His interest was only awakened when the officer scornfully recounted the wastrel's claim to be Sir Antony Esdaile, a friend of the Earl of Bridgewater. The beadle introduced this incident merely as opportunity for displaying to the "quality" his singular gift of sarcasm.

Squire Waterhouse turned and looked thoughtfully at the prisoner. The accommodation of Berkhamsted jail offered few aids to the toilet, and Esdaile, though he had succeeded in washing his face, was hardly an object of admiration. Still, it was evident here was no common vagabond: in his manner was neither the cringing timidity nor the sullen defiance of the ordinary offender. The Squire's shrewd eyes saw farther than the beadle. A gentleman himself, he recognised in the easy carriage, the resigned half-contemptuous smile of the prisoner, a gentleman's quiet submission to the inevitable, a gentleman's scorn of unseemly wrangling with ill-fated fortune. It seemed highly probable that the fellow was indeed the man he claimed to be.

Squire Waterhouse looked him over with a twinkle in his eye. He had lived hard in his day; he knew many reasons a gentleman might have for masquerading as a clown.

"You are Sir Antony Esdaile of Bishop's Lydiard?" he questioned sharply.

Esdaile nodded.

"And of Sibcote, in Yorkshire?"

"No; that is the younger branch of the family. Our other seat is in Westmoreland," he answered carelessly.

Waterhouse nodded. "I know the family well," he said. "Is your cousin, Miss Agatha Gilchrist, alive still?"

"No, and never was that ever I heard of," answered Esdaile, laughing at the trap.

Again the Squire's eyes twinkled. He nodded thoughtfully. It was clear the man knew his facts; but lackeys have played the lord ere now, and played it with skill.

He looked shrewdly at the prisoner. His look was met

by a steady glance,—not the stare of impudence, but the amused smile of one who recognised his difficulty and wondered how he would escape from it.

Squire Waterhouse, descendant of the famous Hertfordshire family, would not so far forget himself as to hold the modern notion that there should be one law for rich and poor alike. He held to his class. But, on the other hand, he knew it was quite possible that this man might be a wastrel (though he did not think it), and he had certainly defied the law.

The Squire was in a quandary; and having no mind to worry his head long over such questions on a sunny summer morning, he fell back on a never-failing maxim of his: "**When in doubt, believe the worst.**"

For it was his philosophy to hold that more men deserve punishment than merit mercy. Acting on that principle, he had the day before signed the warrant for the dousing of Mary Podofar, on the same principle he dealt out justice to Sir Antony Esdaile.

He turned and faced the prisoner with a smile. It amused him that it should fall to his lot to act the part of Nemesis.

"Clap him in the stocks for six hours," he said cursorily to the beadle, and motioned his dismissal.

Esdaile started and stared at the Squire. Then, recollecting himself, he threw back his shoulders, and turned to accompany the beadle with a steady smile of indifference.

The Squire nodded again and laughed to himself. Yes, the fellow was a gentleman,—he knew the type. But a gentleman must be prepared to pay the price of his pleasures.

The Squire's pretty grand-daughter, Joan Waterhouse, had heard all from her seat on the sunny terrace outside the study window, and her romantic little heart was stirred to its depths. She had seen the handsome bedraggled prisoner being marched up to the house, and curiosity as to his story had led her to make inquiries concerning him, and to watch his trial through the window. His unmoved demeanour filled her with the deepest admiration. She had not a doubt of his identity. "Any fool,"

she opined, "could see at a glance he was a nobleman in disguise." She wove innumerable romances concerning him, as she watched his handsome face and gallant bearing, and her heart was in a flutter of excitement when the beadle turned and marched his prisoner from the room. Quick as thought she sped to the dining-room, caught up two glasses and a decanter of her grandfather's favourite port, and hurrying back intercepted the prisoner and his escort at the hall door.

With commendable prudence she first bade the beadle a gracious good-day and offered him a glass of port. Then pouring out a second glass, she shyly advanced to the prisoner.

"Will you take a glass of wine, Sir Antony?" she asked, with a defiant emphasis on the title.

Esdaile looked down into the pretty childish face and smiled.

"You are too good, madame," he answered courteously, "and your offer is a tempting one to a breakfastless man; but—my hands are tied."

She hesitated and flushed. Then she raised the glass to his lips, and he drank gratefully. He little guessed how her heart beat and her hands trembled, as she thus ministered to her hero.

"You are a good Samaritan, madame," he said, smiling down at her, "to minister thus to a poor rogue in trouble."

"Oh! I am so sorry," she said eagerly, "you are to be put in the stocks. I am so sorry."

She looked up pityingly, her eyes filled with tears.

"Nay, ma lame," he said gallantly, "would not a man dare the stocks a thousand times did the road to them always lead past such a ministering angel? Believe me, I would not at this moment change places with any man."

She blushed with pleasure at his words.

She looked cautiously round at the beadle. That worthy was placidly sipping his wine, staring up at the picture of a cross-eyed dame over the chimney-piece, and prudently avoiding interest in the affairs of his betters. If Mistress Joan Waterhouse chose to hold converse with a wastrel

and a vagabond, what had that to do with him? He sipped his port.

Joan drew nearer to the prisoner.

"See," she whispered eagerly, "that door behind you leads through the drawing-room and so into the garden. Take the narrow path to the right, and you will find the little gate in the wall out into Raven's Lane; it will lead you up on to the heath, and there you can hide in the bracken. The watch are waiting outside in the High Street; they will not see you. And I can hold the beadle, —he is a fat, stupid old thing. Go quickly."

Esdaile looked across at the beadle, and his eyes twinkled. He thought he would enjoy seeing the struggle between them. But he shook his head.

"What, madame! Run away and leave you to bear the blame. Not I!"

"Oh! but that does not matter. Indeed I do not mind. Please, please go," she pleaded, clasping her hands eagerly.

Esdaile could not hurt the girl's feelings by explaining to her the futility of her suggestion, seeing that though she might hold the beadle she could not hold his cries, and that Raven's Lane, leading straight off the High Street, was no place for a fettered man to seek concealment. He knew there was no escape for him unless he chose to throw up his masquerading and return to town, for any return to the cottage must mean recapture.

"No, madame, it is impossible," he said, smiling at her eagerness. "Unpleasant though the stocks may prove, they were less distasteful than playing the coward by running away and deserting you. It is impossible. And when all is said and done, I have broken the law, and a man must be ready to pay the price."

"But you were saving a woman," she urged.

"The more reason, then, that I should not now compromise a woman," he answered.

She sighed, and looked at him with a new admiration.

"If I had but time I could persuade grandfather to release you; but there is no time," she said mournfully; "it always takes a full day to persuade him."

Again Esdaile's eyes twinkled. He thought he would like to watch this mite of femininity at her persuasions.

"Oh! I wish I could help you," she sighed.

"Egad! madame, if you would indeed help me, perhaps you would use your powers of persuasion to gain the pardon of Mary Podestat, the woman they were for ducking yesterday. I can do nothing more for her; and I hate to leave a work undone. Perhaps you would fulfil the task I have failed in."

Her eyes brightened. "Oh! yes," she said eagerly, "I will do that; grandfather shall have no bezique till she is pardoned."

The beadle set down his empty glass and slowly rose to his feet.

"Ah! Mr Beadle, I am ready for you," said Esdaile cheerfully. Then he turned to the girl and smiled down on her gratefully. "I am eternally grateful for your kindness, madame," he said. "If ever you should find yourself in need of my services, may I entreat you give me opportunity of proving my devotion. It needs but to send me word; I will hold myself ever at your disposal."

She had no words to answer him. She stood in the doorway and watched him march away. He turned to smile a farewell, and saw her framed in the oak doorway, her eyes following him with a world of admiration in their depths. So, he remembered his wife had stood and watched him depart, after his first visit to her home! even such a childish figure with such devotion in her glance. His thoughts flew to Myra; he would give much might he again see such a look upon her face.

But little Joan Waterhouse, when he had disappeared from view, stepped back into the house with that new light still in her eyes. She looked round the hall with a sigh, and reverently touched the chair on which her hero had leaned. Then, with a quick, furtive movement, she slipped his glass into her apron pocket and ran up to her room. She unlocked a little cupboard in the wall, and there among her treasures she enshrined the precious glass, the chalice which had ministered to his wants. She threw one look from her window over towards Berkhamsted pond, and then went down to the siege of her grandfather.

A romantic maiden indeed, an absurd adorer of heroes. Yet happy are they who have hearts for hero-worship and simple faith to believe in the same. Joan Waterhouse came of a race famed for their unwavering loyalty, and of the hero-worshippers of youth grow the women strong for devotion and sacrifice.

But Sir Antony Esdaile, cursing his luck in Berkhamsted stocks, would have been immensely amazed to learn what admiration he had excited in the heart of his pretty cup-bearer.

At that moment he did not consider himself at all an object calculated to excite admiration; indeed he began to doubt whether he were not possibly a fool. He was still and bruised after his adventures, and village stocks are not designed with a view to comfort. He was hungry, thirsty and tired. The sun was swelteringly hot, and the flies maddening. Moreover, the youth of Berkhamsted had a pretty sense of humour, a plentiful supply of missiles, and—a good aim. Merely, once in the stocks, his hands were untied; he had not the increased aggravation of bonds. It was not without considerable difficulty that he preserved his customary unruffled demeanour, and forbore to delight his tormentors by a sudden outburst of temper. **As it was, he battled with the flies and warded off the rotten eggs and cabbage roots with a certain grim resignation, inwardly vowing vengeance on Squire Waterhouse, and wondering what his wife would think of the affair.**

She would probably regard it as another proof of his villainy, that he should fight and run away and suffer himself to be caught and thrust into the stocks as a rogue. He smiled ruefully as he pictured her scorn, and sighed a little wearily to think that his work might be all to do again.

It was now high noon, and across the green floated the smell of many a tempting stew prepared by the good wives of Berkhamsted for the delectation of their lords. Even the enticing sport of Aunt Sally, with a human victim, proved no rival to the counter-attractions of dinner: the merry sportsmen ran off to satisfy their well-won appetites, and presently the village green was deserted.

Esdaile sighed with relief, but speedily became unpleasantly conscious that he was desperately hungry, and that Nature violently abhors a vacuum. He twisted round in his seat to look up at the sun, and gave a sudden exclamation of surprise.

Up the hill by the church, dainty, cool, dignified as ever, walked his wife, a jug in one hand, his dinner-basket in the other. She marched up to him as unconcerned as she was wont to do every day in the forest, and put down her burden on the bench by his side.

"I am afraid I am rather late," she said apologetically; "the water wouldn't boil."

He stared at her in amazement. She blushed and lowered her lashes; he could read nothing of her thoughts from her face. He was unpleasantly conscious that it would be difficult to find anywhere a more disreputable-looking scarecrow than himself.

"How did you guess where to find me?" he asked.

"Last night I thought you must be hiding in the forest. But this morning a shoemaker came and told me all about you."

"What! the jovial Corinthian? Good man!"

"Yes; he said he had seen me watching from the window, and guessed I was your 'wench.'" She hesitated. "He—he has a monstrous admiration for you; he says you are a King of Bruisers. He—he told me it was a proud day for me when—you married me."

She gave a queer little laugh; Esdaile looked at her anxiously.

"And the woman?" he queried.

"She went away to Flamsted this morning. Her father lives there, and she says she can stay with him for a day or two."

"Good! by that time she will be pardoned. The matter is in train."

"She—he said I ought to thank God on my knees—for—**for my husband**," Myra muttered reflectively.

Esdaile lifted his eyebrows. It appeared his wife had been receiving lectures in his absence.

"A poor sort of husband to be thankful for, eh, Myra?"

he said whimsically. "A wretched fellow who can't even run away successfully."

To his amazement Myra slipped her hand into his, and lifted admiring eyes to his face.

"Egad!" he muttered to himself in bewilderment, "it would seem there's some strange attraction for women in a rogue laid by the heels."

"Why did you do it, Tony?" she asked presently.

"Pon my soul, Myra, I don't exactly know," he answered truthfully. "I began it because the poor wretch looked so scared. I went on with it because I enjoyed it." He gave a little laugh of exultation. His wife looked at him curiously.

"The shoemaker said you fought fifty of them up on the heath. Is that true?"

"I hadn't time to count them. I certainly fought something—for about three minutes."

Myra gazed distastefully at the tumbril. "I suppose you could have put me in that when I—if I were a scold?" she said defiantly.

He laughed. "It is possible I might. The good folk of Berkhamsted seem to cherish unique opinions concerning a man's dealings with his wife."

"Why don't you try it?"

"My dear child!"

She drew closer to his side, and laid her hand gently on his soiled sleeve. "I suppose you have been very good to me, Tony," she murmured.

He stared at her. He did not know his wife in this new mood of meekness. Her former submission had been anything but meek.

"What! when I've squandered your fortune, and brought you down to work for me in the middle of a forest, eh?"

Myra flushed and moved impatiently. "Do you know Tony, I—I believe I've enjoyed it," she said thoughtfully. Then she added hurriedly, "It is so beautiful here, and—and it has never rained, you know."

"No; the weather has certainly been charming," he answered drily.

A few loafers began to gather on the edge of the green.

They stared at Myra, such a dainty figure to sit on the bench of the stocks.

"What do they want?" she asked, eyeing them defiantly.

"A little harmless amusement," he answered grimly.

She looked from him to the crowd, and her eyes flashed.

"Do they—do they throw things?" she asked angrily.

"Ah! in quite a friendly way. It is the national characteristic to heave a brick at a stranger. But it relieves the monotony."

"The cowards! They shall stop that," she muttered defiantly.

"What! Is the Bruiser's wench prepared to fight the village?" he said, laughing down at the small figure by his side.

"I—I could at least stand in front of you," she said eagerly.

"And since when has it been my custom to hide behind your petticoats? What time is it?"

"Just three of the clock."

He stifled a groan. "Lord! three more hours," he muttered. "You must go home, Myra; this is no place for you."

"Oh, no," she pleaded; "let me stay with you."

"No, child, you can do nothing here. And in fact, Myra, I shall probably begin to swear in another ten minutes. On my honour, I would rather not have you here."

Obediently she rose, and took up her basket with a sigh.

"Oh! I wish—I wish I could do something for you," she said.

He looked up at her, and a wave of tenderness came over his face.

"I've been rather a brute to you, Myra," he said remorsefully.

"You!" Suddenly she threw a defiant look at the crowd across the green, and stooping, laid her cheek for a second against him. Then she turned and marched down the hill, swinging her empty basket, and staring triumphantly out on the world.

The victory was won; but Esdaile was not in the least elated. On the contrary, he felt rather ashamed of himself.

In the first place, it did not appear that the victory was his winning—at least, it was not won as he desired. It annoyed him that a rough-and-tumble with half-a-hundred villagers should apparently exact what weeks of tenderness and patience had failed to win for him. Like many a worthy man before and after his time, he puzzled over the mystery of a woman's heart.

But, in the second place, he began to doubt how his wife's new-born devotion would greet the knowledge that the last fortnight's doings had been all a masquerade. He felt uncomfortable at the thought of breaking that news to her.

He leaned forward wearily, resting his elbows on the top of the stocks, his head on his hands. Half an hour passed slowly. Then suddenly Squire Waterhouse, followed by the beadle, appeared round the church and crossed to his side.

"Have you had enough of it?" asked the Squire.

Esdaile started, and looked up angrily into the speaker's face. He gazed for a minute up into the twinkling eyes, then he threw back his head and laughed.

"Certainly, if you are satisfied," he said.

"Good!" The Squire nodded to the beadle to unlock the stocks.

Esdaile staggered to his feet, but sank down on to the bench with an attack of cramp.

The Squire chuckled. "A new experience for your lordship," he said. "Was the game worth the candle?"

Esdaile reviewed his hour of excitement on the previous evening; he thought of the new look of devotion in Myra's eyes; he laughed exultantly. "Worth a hundred such!" he cried.

"Egad! was the wench so pretty?" said Squire Waterhouse regretfully. "I've never set eyes on her."

"There was more than one woman in the affair."

The Squire looked at him enviously. "And all pretty pieces, I'll be bound! Ah! youth, youth!" he sighed. "I'm half of a mind to clap you back in limbo for another hour."

Esdaile shrugged his shoulders indifferently. The Squire clapped him on the back enthusiastically.

"Come up to the house," he cried, "we dine at four! I

can give you a glass of wine—you've never tasted its equal, for all your boasted London cellars."

Esdaile felt inclined to dispute that statement: he shrewdly suspected that he had tasted its equal no longer ago than that very morning. But he did not betray his benefactress.

"A shave, a bath, and a new coat would be more acceptable," he answered, glancing disconsolately at his person.

"Come and see what my rascal can do for you. He was a clever fellow in his day, and I flatter myself he has not entirely lost his cunning," said the old buck, complacently.

So Esdaile limped up the High Street, and resigned himself with a sigh of content to the ministrations of the Squire's valet.

Half an hour later he rejoined his host in the dining-room, as well-groomed a figure as ever walked the Mall. With this return to civilisation he resumed, half unconsciously, his customary mask of quiet, half-cynical indifference, and his habitual drawl.

A shade of disappointment darkened Joan's blue eyes when she saw her hero thus transformed. Certainly a Prince Charming in misfortune is more attractive than a prosperous hero. But when her grandfather presented her, and Esdaile bowed over her hand with courtly homage, she flushed with pleasure. For his eyes met hers with a smile of comradeship, and though she was tongue-tied before his attentions, and felt ready to cry at her own stupidity, yet, when she had courage to meet his glance, her heart beat freely with the sweet knowledge that they shared at least one pleasant memory, and that this man was one who never offered his services unmeaningly nor withdrew a homage once bestowed. She knew her world the richer for a friend.

Is ever man or woman entirely constant? I trow not. Esdaile was in love with his wife, but this sweet child-lostness touched his heart with a never-forgotten tenderness. And years later, when Joan Waterhouse was a happy wife, there would spring at times a light to her eyes and a smile to her lips at the memory of one whose name she did not fear. Nature abhors monopoly. She scatters wide her gifts,

and lest one give all to one, and so lose kindness for the general race—she permits men these small inconstancies of thought, and so teaches them to love all beauty, all courage, all worthiness, when so ever they may meet the same.

To Squire Waterhouse's dismay, immediately after his grand-daughter left the table Esdaile rose to take his leave. The Squire was bitterly disappointed. While Joan was present the conversation had necessarily floated over the surface of life—a glance at the army abroad, a question as to who would remain in favour at Court, an earnest discussion as to the merits of the new-set cravat introduced by Lord Petre (for the Squire had by no means resigned all the vanities of life,—dress was still to him a subject for thoughtful study). But when Joan left them, Squire Waterhouse had hoped to learn more about his guest's recent adventures, in which so many women appeared to be concerned; he had also many gallant stories of his own to relate. But in vain were entreaties, reproaches, or challenges; Esdaile was resolute to take his leave.

"Indeed, sir, you are too good," he answered good-humouredly; "I'm monstrous indebted to you, but I must be up at my—er—cottage at six o'clock. My wife awaits me."

"Your wife!" exclaimed the Squire in amaze.

"Assuredly! my wife, Lady Esdaile."

"But—but—" he stammered, "what the devil should a wife be doing in this affair?"

Esdaile chuckled. "Egad! Squire, my wife is the very centre and soul of the adventure."

The Squire mopped his brow and stared at his guest in bewilderment.

"Jove!" he muttered, "we went fast enough in my time, but damme if our wives set the pace."

Again Esdaile laughed exultantly. "Ah! you lacked pluck in your day, Squire," he said; "for myself, I choose the swifter game. A wife's the highest stake a man can play for; what matter whether he start the chase before or after marriage, so only he win her in the end?"

But the Squire shook his head doubtfully, as he bade Esdaile farewell; of such had not been the adventures of his youth.

Baulked of his guest's company, he did not linger long over his wine. He strolled out to his seat on the terrace and sent his grand-daughter to her spinet. And sitting there, in the glow of the sunset, listening to the haunting love-songs which she sang, he reviewed the days of his youth. Many lovely faces floated past him on the rose-tipped clouds of the sunset: many dark eyes smiled at him from the heart of the dreaming west; many soft lips, borne on the wings of the breezes, brushed his cheek. He knew them all, and smiled back a gallant greeting. But when the crimson glory sank behind the forest, and the white mist crept up the hill, all other memories faded into silence, and but one face smiled at him through the gloom, a face, the counterpart of the girl within, singing at her spinet.

Fear not, oh, ye women who are wives, so ye be true-hearted! A man may have many tender fancies as he strolls in the blaze of the sunshine, many gallantries to recall as he sits at night over his wine. But when the shadows of darkness fall, and he draws nigh the edge of the bourne, all such are lost in the mists of silence, and he sees but one face awaiting him in the glory of Eternity.

Meanwhile Esdaile swung up the hill from the village as fast as his stiff and weary limbs would take him. He whistled a love-song as he walked, and the glad light of anticipation glowed in his eyes.

For howsoever it had come about, and whatsoever might come of it in the future, at least Myra was his now, his in all devotion. He resolved not yet to drop the curtain on the comedy, not yet to end the masquerade; he would enjoy the reward of his labours in one week of Paradise. And during that week he might perhaps draw her so near to him that in the end she would even forgive his trickery. He might—he might——! And if he did? Why then—why, then——!!!

Then—Lady Betty Acton chose to interfere!

Her heavy coach, drawn by four stout horses, lumbered past him at the brow of the hill. When he reached the cottage he found her ladyship embracing an unwilling hostess upon the doorstep.

"Lud! child," she was crying, "how monstrous well you look. What a complexion! And how that linsey gown becomes you! I vow I'm half of a mind to turn dairy-maid myself. It would be a diversion after the staling of town. But tell me, Myra, you'll give me a bed here for to-night? And to-morrow we'll drive back to town together."

"Back to town!" gasped Myra.

"Yes, have I not told you? La! la! what a head I have. Such news! Oh, what an adorable room!" she continued, entering the cottage. "How vastly taking! How I wish it were my lot to live in such a cot! Honeysuckle! How monstrous sweet! And roses! Lud! you fortunate creatures. And bless me! here comes Sir Antony!" she continued, turning to him a pair of mischievous eyes. "Come, sir, welcome me as the bearer of good news."

"Lady Betty Acton commands a welcome wherever she deigns to bestow the pleasure of her company, the light of her incomparable charms," answered Esdaile courteously, bowing over her hand.

"What, sir, your gallantry then does not rust in the wilderness? And, pray, upon what country Chloe or Phyllis have you been practising the same?"

"In the wilderness, madame, by all tokens a man should improve in the art. For there he has unique opportunity for practising it upon that most severe of critics, as she is the most inspiring of subjects—his own wife."

Lady Betty laughed and glanced saucily at Myra.

"Lud! Sir Antony, it is well your exile is ended—you grow too proficient in the art."

But Myra did not smile. She was gazing thoughtfully at her husband, trying to see in this polished, cynical gallant, the man who yesterday had denied and fought fifty brawlers, who, that morning, had sat in the stocks and laughed exultingly at recollection of the same. She could not reconcile the two. She frowned, and sighed to think she had again lost the man in the courtier.

Esdaile noted the shadow in her eyes, and his heart fell. Even so he remembered had Joan Waterhouse looked when she met him at dinner. He was puzzled.

"What the plague," he thought, "should there be in a dirty coat to attract a woman so?"

For he did not consider that a woman may rather crave proof that she has married a man, than that she is wed to a clothes-horse.

Betty turned to Myra.

"I will send the coach down to the King's Arms. You will shelter me for the night, will you?"

"Assuredly," answered Myra despondently.

Esdaile turned away to hide the chagrin on his face.

"A poor forester's cottage can hardly offer suit. I'll accommodate you for your ladyship," he protested.

"Tut! the place is adorable," answered Lady Betty. "I only fear it will make my news unwelcome. You will be so loath to leave it."

"Leave it!"

"Lad! to be sure, I have not yet told you. Such news! Myra, Sir Antony's cousin, Mr Dawson, has left him a fortune. He is to-day one of the richest men in the country."

Esdaile uttered a smothered exclamation, and whirled round on his heel to stare in amazement at the speaker. Myra looked round the little room, and half-unconsciously sighed.

"Yes," continued Lady Betty imperturbably, "the attorneys came to Charles to ask your whereabouts. Charles was detained at St James's, so I took coach yesterday, and posted down here, to be the first bearer of the news."

"How monstrous kind," murmured Myra regretfully.

"May I ask, madame," interrupted Sir Antony grimly, "the name of the attorney who told you this—er—welcome news."

Betty turned and faced him. Her eyes were full of mischievous challenge.

"Lad! sir, it was the very same attorney who brought you news of—your bankruptcy."

Esdaile looked at her helplessly, and muttered something unintelligible. His eyes were very angry.

Betty chuckled. "Is it not fortunate?" she continued cheerfully, "your house is still as it was, the effects have

not yet been sold. You can return to town to-morrow, and you will be in time for Lady Hastings' fête on Thursday next. It is to be the success of the season. Are you not monstrous glad, Myra?"

Myra looked across at her husband, but he did not meet her eyes. "Oh, monstrous glad!" she said defiantly.

"You will drive back to town with me to-morrow?"

"I—I suppose so," answered Myra, with a disconsolate glance at her husband's back.

Esdaille strode out of the cottage.

Presently Myra turned reluctantly to prepare the supper. She felt very disinclined to kill the fatted calf in honour of this news-bringer. Betty watched her proceedings and commented on them rapturously.

"Lud! child, can you cook? How monstrous clever. How I should love to live in such a cottage. I protest I am half of a mind to turn rustic. Let me help you now. What shall I do? Shall I put this pot on the fire? What should go in here? Butter? Not butter? But I have put the butter in. Tut! child, good butter harms nothing. What are you seeking? The pot? It's on the fire. Should it not be there? I put it there. Oh! I trust the mess is not burnt. Nothing in the pot? Ah! then all is well. The pot itself burnt? Lud! child, what does it matter?" So she chattered, darting about rapturously, and hindering her companion in every movement. Myra felt her temper playing her traitor.

"Would you not wish to walk in the forest, madame?" she asked frigidly. "Antony is somewhere at hand, and would gladly escort you."

Nothing loath, Betty hurried out of the cottage, and turned down the cool forest glades in search of her host.

She found him presently, axe in hand, venting his temper on a log of firewood. Betty seated herself elaborately on a tree-stump and eyed him curiously.

"Lud! what a fortunate creature Myra is," she began; "I wonder would Charles do this for me."

"Surely no man—not even a husband—could disobey the commands of Lady Betty Acton," answered Esdaille, with grim politeness.

Betty smiled. "Still gallant, sir. Lud! to think of the King of the Macaronis turned wood-cutter. I protest it is well they do not know of this in town, or it would speedily become the mode. There would not be a tree left standing within a mile of St James's."

Esdale continued his work in silence.

"You are not very grateful to me, Sir Antony," complained Betty at length.

"Grateful!" The axe descended violently on the log, and the splinters flew.

"I protest you should be monstrous thankful to me for putting an end to your exile. For I've told no lies,—Mr Dawson did leave you a fortune—six years ago. And how else, pray, did you propose to end this masquerade?"

"In my own way and in my own time," said Esdale angrily.

Betty sighed resignedly. "What an ungrateful creature is man! Here am I come all the way from London to help you out of this pothole, and not a word of gratitude. Oh! lud, no! Not one. And what could you have done, pray? It were impossible to stay here all your days. And how tell your wife? No woman could forgive being twice tricked."

Esdale started. "Is that so?" he asked thoughtfully. "And how, pray, is your—er—fable to help the situation?"

She looked up triumphantly. "You can now return to town, and you need never tell her of the comedy you have played," she explained eagerly.

Esdale tossed aside his axe impatiently.

"I am not entirely untaught by experience, madame," he said bitterly. "It isn't likely I should risk a second time a friend unmasking to her—my—villainies."

"You will tell her yourself?" cried Betty blankly.

"I must. And thanks to your ladyship's very kind interference I must tell her at once, instead of waiting till I had—till a fit time."

Betty rose, a picture of resigned martyrdom.

"Never again will I try to help a man," she laudably resolved. "I will take Charles's advice, and leave them to their own inexplicable folly."

Esdaile looked down grimly at this fair destroyer of all his plans.

"If I were Charles Acton, madame," he said slowly, "I should be strongly tempted to—shake you."

Betty turned and stared at him haughtily; but in a moment her face dimpled into smiles.

"Charles does sometimes," she said, with twinkling eyes, "and, lud! I rather like it." Then she added mischievously, "If your fingers itch to be a-witeshaking, sir, why not—begin at home?"

Then she turned and walked with much dignity back to the cottage, leaving Sir Antony Esdaile musing on her words.

X.

Lady Betty Acton so far broke her vow of non interference with man's folly in that she carefully prevented Sir Antony from carrying out his resolve of explaining the whole affair to his wife before their return to town, and so spoiling her plan. This was not a difficult matter to accomplish: it needed but that she should cling to her hostess with greater fervour than this fair lady had ever yet shown for the companionship of her sex; and Sir Antony's halting attempts at private speech with his wife were easily baffled.

They returned to town on the following day, Lady Betty Acton driving her friend in her coach. By evening Myra found herself once again installed in her husband's house in Soho Square—once more restored to her rank and station. All was unchanged; it seemed as though the past fortnight had been a dream.

Early the following morning, while Myra was drinking her chocolate and discussing with her maid her toilet for the great fête at Kilburn, a message came from her husband asking her to ride with him, if not too wearied by her journey of the previous day.

She accepted with alacrity. She had not seen him alone since she parted from him in the stocks, since she had given him that unsolicited proof of her devotion. Her cheeks flushed, her eyes brightened at the memory.

They set out early, before most fashionable folk were afoot, and turned their horses' heads in the direction of Hyde Park, already become the most popular resort of all London equestrians. Myra noted with surprise a certain confidence and hesitation in her husband's manner, and marvelled at the cause.

They turned down one of the less-frequented paths in that wilderness of wood and heath, and checked their horses for a walk.

"How strange it is to be back again, Tony!" mused Myra. "Indeed it is all so strange. To be a lady of quality, a peer's wife, and again a woman of wealth, all in the space of a couple of weeks! Had ever woman such a visit of Fortune? The days at Berkhamsted seem like a dream."

"A dream—or a nightmare?" he asked quickly.

"A dream, Tony," she whispered, and looked at him under her lashes. But he took no note of the variation in her glance, and her face fell.

"What if it were a dream, Myra?" he asked bluntly. "Or, rather, a masquerade played for your edifi—er—my amusement."

She looked up, startled. "How so?" she asked sharply.

He turned and faced her steadily.

"The thing must out, Myra, and plain words are best. I was never a second time ruined. Your fortune is still intact. The seizure was a pretence. Our poverty a play. I—I have tricked you again, Myra."

He held himself caretully in hand, waiting for the outburst of anger, for the biting scorn which he confidently expected would follow on his confession. But no words came. Myra was too amazed for speech. She was too full of wonder as to the meaning of this latest "villainy," too intent upon fathoming what manner of man this husband of hers might be.

Antony stole a furtive look at her face. She sat gazing thoughtfully before her, an inscrutable look in her eyes. Presently the shadow of a smile hovered round her lips. His hopes rose. Was this wife of his at last developing a sense of humour?

At length she broke the silence.

"I wonder why you did it, Tony?" she said quietly.

He laughed a little doubtfully.

"You had such a plaguey unflattering opinion of me, Myra. No man's vanity could have endured it quietly. I wanted to prove to you that I had no need of your fortune; that you were at least wedded to a husband who could work for his wife."

A shadow of disappointment darkened her eyes.

"Was that all?" she asked blankly.

He hesitated a moment: then he drew near her side and laid his hand on hers.

"No, Myra," he said softly, stooping to see her face,—
"not quite all. I knew no words of mine would convince you that such a villain as would wed you for your fortune might possibly, in the course of time, find himself fallen in love with the most plaguey unweoable wife in Christendom. So I carried you off to the country, child, to see how kindly Pan would speed my wooing. I hoped his aid in winning your favour."

They turned a corner of the path and came face to face with Lord Wildmore, riding abroad full merrily in the freshness of the morning. He looked at the couple and smiled whimsically.

"Another hundred guineas out of pocket," he said ruefully, as he gave them good-day and trotted on, humming "Oh, Fickle Fair!"

Myra stiffened suddenly from head to foot, and shook off her husband's hand. For the sight of this jovial wagerer had wakened a sudden fear in her heart. Was it her love her husband sought, or was it only her favour, valued at £100?

She gave a bitter little laugh.

"Ah, my favour! To be sure I had forgotten, you asked me for it three days ago. And to-day is the last day of your wager."

He jerked back his reins so sharply that his horse reared and pawed the air. "Damn Peter Wildmore," he muttered between his teeth. Was he to lose all he had toiled for, through this fool wager of his?

Myra noticed his anger and took heart. Had her shot told there would have followed protestations and denials, he rightly opined. Here was only the silence of intense anger. **Her suspicions were surely then unjust.**

"My favour," she repeated slowly. "Lad! it seems a shame your toil should go unrewarded, Antony. I will yield you my favour to-night at the fête at Kilburn—if you care to ask me for it. Oh! after a fortnight's poverty you deserve your hundred pounds. Surely never was wager more assiduously won."

She looked at him furtively. He was white with anger, but held himself in check: a gentleman may not suffer himself to lose his temper with his wife! But she knew she enraged him. As she looked at his compressed lips and resolute chin, she was seized with a sudden unaccounting irritation that he, "the King of Bruisers" as the boxer had called him, should allow her to flout him so outrageously. Was this the man who had fought fifty to his down yonder at Berkhamsted?

She turned to him with a quick, impulsive gesture.

"Oh! use your curb, your curb, Antony," she cried separately. "A mare of any spirit hates to be ridden always on the snaffle."

Then, whipping up her horse, she galloped out of the Park.

But he, riding then with snaffle loose, saw no meaning in her words; indeed he scarcely heeded that she had spoken. He galloped after her with rage in his eyes, disappointment in his heart, seeing his dream shattered.

XI.

Myra Esdaile drove to the fête at Kilburn in Lady Betty Arden's coach. Her ladyship eagerly scrutinised her friend under the shadow of her dark lashes, seeking for sign whether or no Sir Antony had yet carried out his lamentable resolution of undeceiving his wife. But Myra chatted gaily throughout the drive, discussing the doings of Fashion during her absence from town, and gave her fair companion

no indication of her thoughts. So, though Lady Betty's fingers itched to be remodelling the affair, she found no excuse for further interference.

So to the Fête of the Honey-pots they went.

Sir Antony Esdaile rode to Kilburn with the Duke of Southwark, Sir Harry Ford, Lord Petre, and others of Lord Wildmore's wagers, a gallant company, riding shoulder to shoulder to the last attack. And as they rode, Sir Harry, that great philosopher of wooing, gave them the benefit of his opinions upon the management of the unmanageable sex.

"It's not to be denied there may be shades of difference in character among the pretty creatures, but I'll wager this mare of Seaton's—and a cursed-mouthed beast she is—there's only one way of wooing the charmers."

"What, Harry! Never a failure?" queried Lord Petre mockingly.

Sir Harry thought of the fair Sybilla, and hesitated. But he was a true son of the nation which never recognises defeat.

"The first thing for a man to do," he continued dogmatically, "is to convince the unwilling Fair that he considers her the most beautiful and adorable creature in Christendom. Then, if she admire nothing else—she will at least admire his taste and judgment."

"That should be an easy matter to accomplish," chuckled old Sir Jacob. "They study their mirrors well and read what answers they choose in those books."

"Secondly, while teaching her that she is the most beautiful of women, your lover must demonstrate that kindness in women is more to his mind—and seek it at the hands of her fairest rival."

"Egad! that's reasonable enough," said Mr Steward thoughtfully; "and what next?"

"That is all! The deed is done, the wench is won," said Sir Harry conclusively.

"You're wrong there, Harry; she may be won, but the affair isn't so concluded. When you've won her, what then, eh? How manage her then?"

"By the Lord Harry! that's simple enough. Stroke her

gently, give her plenty of sugar, and—ride her on the curb. Egad!" he broke off suddenly, "there's Susie Mills, the flower-girl out of Bond Street,—I haven't clapped eyes on her for a week. She's a mighty fond creature, with the prettiest-set neck in Christendom." He galloped down a side street and disappeared.

Presently he rejoined them, one cheek considerably redder than the other, gloomy of countenance.

"Ever alluring,
Seldom enduring,
Chloe who flouts me, I sigh for in vain,"

sang Sir Antony, with a mocking glance.

"I'm not denying," repeated Sir Harry, "there may be shades of difference in character among the sex. But all women are eternally ungrateful."

So these gallants rode on to their Fate (as Mr Steward put it, much to his admiration), the Fête of the Honey-pots.

That morning Sir Antony Esdaile, returning angry and disappointed from his ride, had resolved to give up the struggle and never again to seek his wife's company. But chancing on Lord Charles Acton in the Mall, that gentleman, having nothing else to do, wagered him fifty crowns that Peter Wildmore would pocket his £100 on the morrow, and Sir Antony took the wager. There was that in Lord Charles's manner which betokened challenge, which raised opposition. Antony took the wager. If he could not again win his wife's devotion, he would at least take the favour she had promised him—she should not flout him before the world.

So he was resolved, or deemed himself resolved, ere he rode to Kilburn. But at sight of her again, his resolution vanished, lost in the light of his love. What! be content with her favour to stale in a common wager? Never, while she had a heart to be won. Leave her to go her way, flouting her with his indifference? He could not; he was helpless against her with the helplessness of a man in love. Give up the struggle in despair? Never, while a shred of hope remained. So he yielded himself up to the spell of

her sweetness, content (if she willed it) that she should scorn and flout him again if he might still be near her, smiling to think that he who had set out proudly to conquer her heart had unwittingly surrendered his own. And ever she drew him. As she jested and laughed in a throng of courtiers, still with eyes, with lips, with smiles she drew him—with every gesture and every word. And hour by hour his passion grew.

At last, when the evening was far advanced, she yielded him her hand for the dance, and together they took their place for that famous "*Minuet au Cœur*."

When Sir Antony glanced round the room and marked the jest which the Fates (and the company) had played,—i.e., that only six couples, and they Lord Wildmore's wagers, stood up to the dance,—he would have led his partner aside, having no mind for further play-acting. But Myra entered at once into the spirit of the comedy. Her first curtsy was a challenge, the gift of her hand an invitation, her look—a scornful rebuff. Unwillingly he found himself drawn into the sport. Presently he was wooing her, entreating her, by every look and gesture, as ardently as any gallant there. And as they danced it seemed to him that the comedy was not yet ended,—that still he chased her down the labyrinths of Dan Cupid's merry maze.

The dance ended, her hand still rested in his, and she murmured softly, "Let us go into the garden, Tony."

So they stepped out into the moon-kissed garden, where Night was weaving her spells. The air was luscious with the rich odours of the flowers, the roses and jasmine bearing sweet-scented memories of the loves of all the ages. Love melodies floated through the breeze from the soft-toned violins.

They crossed the lawn and went down into the silver lights and shadows of the rose-garden.

Sir Antony Esdaile looked at his wife, and his passion stirred his heart.

"Myra, Myra!" he whispered, his voice deep and broken with tenderness.

She turned and faced him. The dancing moonbeams

seemed to light a mocking challenge in her eyes. Softly she spoke.

"For three weeks you have honoured me by the suit of my favour; I give it you—to-night."

"Myra!" he breathed again, drawing nearer to her side.

Without a word she drew from the folds of her belt a paper and handed it to him.

He took it like one in a dream, and stared at it in bewilderment. Slowly his brain cleared, and he read the words inscribed:—

"Such lands, moneys, and estates as I in my person was possessed of before my marriage, I hereby yield in all willingness—to my husband, declaring them lawfully his.

"(Signed) MYRA ESDAILE."

"I trust," she said softly—"I trust, sir, you are now satisfied to the full."

Slowly he raised his head and faced his wife, where she stood silent with a little mocking twist of her lips. And then suddenly, in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, all his self-control vanished. Perhaps those weeks in close touch with Nature had worn away the veneer of civilisation, perhaps the scent of the roses had entered his blood and the passion which stirred his heart broke bounds and swept away all control. Such moments come at least once in a lifetime to every man, moments when all artificial restraints vanish, and he sinks back into Primitive Man.

He took her by the shoulders and shook her roughly. "You baggage," he muttered hoarsely, "how dare you? How dare you?" Then he crushed her violently in his arms, and covered her face, her hair, her neck, with savage kisses.

As suddenly as it had come upon him the fit left him. He loosed her and stepped back, staring at her in amazement, once more the quiet, polished man of the world, disgusted that of all men he, Antony Esdaile, should so lose control over himself as to raise his hand against any woman, most of all against his wife. He bit his lips, the picture of shame and vexation.

But Myra stood transfixed, staring at him fascinated, with flushed cheeks, parted lips, eyes aglow with excitement. Her heart beat exultantly, the blood coursed through her veins with a delicious thrill. For here assuredly at last was no polished Courtier seeking her favour by trickery, by artificial gallantry, but a Man crying for her love. She had felt the fierce manhood surging through him; her whole being trembled at the magnetism of his touch.

For the first time in her life she knew man's passion, and her heart leaped at its call.

With a half-sobbing cry of triumph she ran to his side, she slipped her arms about his neck.

"Oh, Tony, Tony," she whispered blissfully, "why didn't you do it before?"

"Myra!" he gasped, in utter amazement at this unexpected result of his violence.

"Oh, dear Tony," she murmured, hiding her face on his breast. "It was monstrous wicked of me, I know. I wanted so much to—to come to you before, but somehow—I *couldn't* until you—you made me."

With a cry of exultation he gathered her in his arms.

"Myra! At last!"

The moon discreetly dipped behind a bank of clouds; for some minutes there was silence in the rose-garden.

"You know, Myra, I understand nothing at all of this matter," said Sir Antony presently, when they prepared to return to the house. "Am I to—er—shake you, whenever I want my way with you?"

"Certainly not!" exclaimed Myra scandalised. "I shall be monstrous angry if ever you do such a thing again. It would be unpardonable."

"Ye gods! How can a man hope to understand a woman?"

"There is no necessity," answered Myra wisely. "So," she added softly—"so he love her."

The dance was ended. Monsieur Angelo had gone to the spinet, his clear tenor voice was carolling Herrick's most passionate love rhapsody, "To Anthea." The song was nearly ended when they crossed the lawn.

"Thou art my love, my life, my heart,
The very eyes of me ;
And hast command of every part
To live or die for thee."

Esdaile took both his wife's hands in his, and stooped to kiss them.

"And so have you, dear angel," he whispered.

But she freed her hands and placed them round his neck.

"No, no, Tony," she objected. "Not angel; just—your wife."

The violins clashed triumphantly as they stepped again into the hall. Many whimsical smiles and glances greeted their entrance.

"Charles," said Lady Betty Acton, scanning Myra's face from afar,—*"Charles, Tony Esdaile has won his wager."*

"Egad! has he though?" answered Lord Charles ruefully. "Then he pockets fifty crowns of mine to-morrow."

"Oh! Charles, how foolish of you," said his wife reproachfully. "Lud! when will you learn not to interfere with other folk's—er—wagers?"

Many congratulatory quips and humorous questions were flung at Antony Esdaile as he mounted his horse to ride back to town.

"Come back and sup with me, Esdaile," cried Lord March. "Harry, Tom Denver, Petre here, are coming, and a host of others. We'll make a night of it."

"Not to-night, Jack, I'm—er—busy."

"Egad! more conjugal felicity?" queried Lord Denver mockingly.

"Tony wants to make certain of his wager," said Sir Harry Ford, with the bitterness of failure.

Antony Esdaile flung up his head and laughed triumphantly.

"Wager be hanged!" he cried, "I've won a wife. If any man can prove a better three weeks' work than that, let him—gad! let him seek a better reward. For myself, I am fully content."

Amid a storm of laughter and expostulations he spurred his horse and galloped after Lady Betty's coach.

But Sir Harry shook his head solemnly; he waxed sentimental in the moonlight.

"Devilish queer thing, this marrying," he mused. "It would seem it must always make of a man either a plaguey dull lover, a plaguey brutal devil, or—a philosopher. Now, I wonder what it would make of me."

Myra let down the window of the coach and leaned out. Sir Antony laid his hand on hers, and so they rode back to town. Poor Lady Betty, stiff-necked with perpetual gazing through the opposite window, yawned at the length of the drive.

"Lud! What a good-natured creature I am," she soliloquised. "And to think it is all my doing. I don't think even Charles appreciates me as I deserve. I must speak to him about it."

At last the drive ended, and they reached Soho Square. Sir Antony handed his wife from the coach, and led her up the stairs into her room. The blood coursed wildly through his veins; he felt her hand tremble in his.

"Myra——?" he whispered questioningly, when they were alone.

She lifted her sweet, blushing face to his. She flung wide her arms in gesture of absolute surrender.

"Yes, Tony, yes," she cried. "Yours—in all things—for ever."

So falls the curtain on Dan Cupid's comedy.

CHAPTER IV.

THE PROVING OF DAPHNE.

IN his library sat the Duke of Southwark, indulging in meditation upon the hollowness of life. He was sick of town, of masque and rout, of cock-fight and bear-pit, of the women of fashion, their empty follies, vulgar manners, and abusive tongues. He was weary, too, of the wits and their shallow epigrams, of the fops and their incessant striving after fashions in peruke or a fresh scent upon their 'kerchiefs. His soul shuddered at the scarcely less reputable attractions of Drury Lane. He had no mind for politics. He was even weary of dice and cards, of stake and wager: to what more vacant depths of misery could a man sink? Had he been a woman he could not have been more keenly afflicted with the vapours.

As he mused, his thoughts flew to the country he had loved in his boyhood. He felt again the exhilarating freshness of the early dew-scented morning, smelt the sweet breath of the meadows, and of the whispering flowers raising their heads to greet returning day. He saw again, with inward recollection, the daisies blushing upwards to the blushing sky, the shadows of the woods stabbed through and through by the rays of the sun, the delicate green leaves, each distinct, curling up, gold-tipped, towards the light. He thought upon the peace of the forest, the strength and stillness of the hills. After five years' indulgence in the dissipations of the town, when, having drained the cup of pleasure, he tasted the

dregs, his soul revolted, and there awoke an aspiration in his heart for a simpler life, a purer atmosphere, and a nobler goal.

"To-morrow," he thought—"to-morrow I will again to the country." There, perhaps, he too might find peace.

Nay, but on the morrow he was pledged to attend Lady Darcy's morning levee, and he could not break his faith with her, for in the previous winter there had passed certain tendernesses betwixt them. So a day later it must be. Yet he was impatient to taste these newly recollected pleasures; and since the sun must rise and the birds must awaken in the neighbourhood of town as in the country, he resolved to go the following morning to the meadows beyond Hyde Park and there watch the sun rise.

A strange resolve! But the Dukes of Southwark were ever strange in their desires, and so set upon whatever purpose they had in hand that they could brook no delay.

Grey and silent lay the world around him when the Duke stepped into the open space of the meadows in the early morning, and, taking up his post with his back to a tree, gazed over a dark expanse of country to the pearly haze of the eastern sky.

Idly he gazed, but on a sudden his glance was arrested and his heart leaped within him, for lo! when the first ray of gold shot through the grey curtain of the east, from the shadow of the wood stepped forth the figure of a woman.

The Duke held his breath and gazed at her spellbound. Swiftly she advanced into the centre of the meadow and there paused. She lifted her head to the heavens, her hood falling back and revealing her white brow and soft masses of shining hair: she clasped her hands on her breast, and so, in attitude of worship, she stood watching the sun rise, waiting for the light.

Then the Duke rose, his heart burning within him at this unexpected vision. Nearer and nearer he advanced until he stood close behind her, could mark the clearness of her fair skin, the curve of her golden lashes. Yet she saw

him not, for her eyes were fixed upon the eastern sky. So, side by side, they stood to watch the sun rise.

And then, when at last the sun appeared in all his power and the world was flooded with light, then only did the woman move.

"Dominus, illuminatio mea," she murmured devoutly, and bowed her head.

"Amen," breathed the Duke in the ecstasy of his worship.

The girl did not start or tremble at the unexpected complement to her prayer. For a moment she stood rigid, then she turned and looked on the Duke. Their eyes, still filled with the glory they had witnessed together, met in one long glance; the sunbeams darted down to enkindle their hearts; Nature's spell was woven.

Yet she was a woman and he a man, unknown to one another, and alone: even the magic charm of their surroundings could not long dispel the recollections of Society's conventions. She dropped her eyes, blushed rosy red under his glance, and, sweeping him a low curtsy, turned to walk towards the wood.

The Duke sprang to her side.

"Madame, permit me to escort you home. Indeed it is not safe for you to wander unprotected at this hour."

She eyed him doubtfully and shook her head.

"You are kind, sir, but I prefer to be alone. I require no protection."

Still he persisted.

"It is not seemly, madame. You do not know to what annoyances you may be subjected."

She frowned at his persistence.

"Again I thank you," she answered coldly. "But your anxieties are ill-advised. For the last two months I have come here every morning at sunrise, yet this is the first annoyance to which I have ever been subjected."

At that he stepped back ashamed, and she, walking swiftly to the edge of the meadow, disappeared in the shadow of the trees.

The Duke of Southwark walked home from Hyde Park

in a maze of doubt, wonder, and delight. No more thoughts had he of journeying to the country: what sweeter thing could the country hold than his fair goddess of the sunrise? Vainly he speculated upon her identity. No woman of fashion she; what woman of fashion ever saw a sunrise? Yet no country milkmaid this, no poor parson's daughter, no City madame; her voice, the quiet dignity of her carriage, the grace and charm of her manner, gave the lie to any such supposition. Nor was she an actress, else had he known her; no such fair stage-flower blushed unnoted by the Duke. In his perplexity he vowed her no mortal but a goddess, a fair Daphne of the Grove, venturing forth to sport for a space with mortals.

But he had given his promise to attend Lady Darcy's levee, so he sobered his ecstasy and prepared to play the rôle expected of him by the lady who claimed his attendance, and, so the gossips said, would fain have claimed more.

Lady Darcy was the acknowledged pioneer and leader in all the fads, follies, and fashions of the day, and her efforts to retain her position as such often taxed the poor lady's ingenuity almost beyond her powers. The introduction of the Morning Levee was her latest bid for notoriety, and promised to become one of the most popular forms of self-advertisement, at least among the young and lovely of her sex.

It was nearly eleven o'clock of the forenoon when the Duke of Southwark, accompanied by Lord March, presented himself at Lady Darcy's house in Berkley Square, and was ushered by a pretty French waiting-woman into her mistress's chamber.

In a large, handsomely carved bed, in the centre of a room hung with eastern silks and heavy with rich perfumes, lay Lady Darcy. Some half-dozen visitors had already arrived and were seated about the room, sipping chocolate and listening idly to the reading of a poem, an Ode to Beauty's Shrine, which a youthful and needy poet, a *protégé* of her ladyship's, had sought permission to dedicate to his patron.

"These last two lines are monstrous feeble, madame,"

drawled the Duke, idly advancing to the side of her ladyship's couch.

Lady Darcy turned eagerly at the sound of his voice. Her eyes smiled upon him tenderly, and as she stretched out her hand in greeting, she momentarily disarranged her coverlet very prettily, and drew it in place again with a becoming blush.

"What! you here!" she cried with affected surprise. "I am vastly obliged for your Grace's visit: I had thought you would have waited upon my Lady Winston this morning."

The Duke smiled whimsically at this artless allusion to one whose rivalry of Lady Darcy's lead was growing dangerous.

"Nay, madame," he protested, "am I then so faithless that you accuse me thus?"

"Many pay homage to a rising sun," murmured Lady Darcy pathetically.

"I do better than that, for I trust presently to pay homage to a rising goddess," he answered smiling.

"Lud, duke! you were always a flatterer," she laughed, as she turned to greet Lord March.

"Where is Dorothy?" asked the latter, with a yawn.

Lady Darcy looked up quickly.

"What do you want with her," she asked sharply.

Lord March shrugged his shoulders.

"Southwark has never seen her; she is worth seeing," he answered carelessly.

"Do you then think her so monstrous pretty?" asked her ladyship, looking at him provokingly.

"Only since the day I saw her apart from her mistress," he answered gallantly.

"And when was that? How came it that you saw her alone?" she asked again sharply.

"Egad! madame, how should I explain her movements? May she not be spoken with as well as any other creature?"

Lady Darcy frowned.

"No," she said. "Dorothy's a good girl. I won't have her played upon. I believe Dorothy's virtue actually pro-

teets my reputation in some quarters," she added, with a most tempting little laugh.

"Her duty being to acquire virtue for her mistress, eh?" laughed the Duke. "A sort of whipping-boy, *à la mode*."

"I protest, Duke, you are mightily severe," pouted Lady Darcy. "Have you then no belief in woman's virtue?"

"He were a scoundrel else," cried Lord March. "Every woman is a prodigy of virtue — till she be put to the proof."

"Tut, man, you should say — till she be caught tripping," answered the Duke ironically.

"Whatever ails his Grace to-day that he is so severe?" cried Lady Darcy playfully. "Give him his chocolate, Adèle, and silence him."

Presently a few of the visitors took their leave.

"I shall rise now, Adèle," cried her ladyship. "Does your Grace intend to wait?" she continued, turning to the Duke with a little pleading glance; "or have you a pressing engagement elsewhere?"

But the Duke was already weary of her company. He turned his back on her entreating glances, and with a ready excuse likewise took his departure.

As they left the house behind them and strolled towards the Mall Lord March laughed quietly, retrospectively, but the Duke groaned.

"Darcy is a lucky man," he said at length, with a serious shake of his head.

"Darcy? What the devil do you mean?" cried Lord March.

"He is dead," answered the Duke coolly.

Lord March laughed loud.

"Best beware," he said. "Has it never struck you that her ladyship has no objection to becoming 'your Grace'?"

The Duke gazed at him horror-struck.

"Heaven preserve us!" he muttered. Then he added, with one of his sudden changes to seriousness to which his friends were not unaccustomed: "No, Jack; no woman becomes Duchess of Southwark till she have proved her virtue 'gainst all odds."

"Ah! then you'll die a bachelor, my friend, for you'd

never marry a dowl," was the laughing reply, as Lord March swung away to greet a friend.

But the Duke wandered away alone, musing upon the contrasting scenes of the morning, waiting with impatience for day to fade. For to him all the day was darkness till sunrise came again.

The following morning, with the first glow of sunrise, again, he met his Goddess of the Grove. Again they stood side by side to watch the glowing east; again he joined his "Amen" to her prayer; again their hearts greeted in one long glance. But when she would have passed him by in silence, he could no more restrain himself; he pressed to her side.

"Madame," he cried, wondering himself at his unwonted hesitation—"madame, I scarce dare hope your pardon for again addressing you; yet may not the sovereign of the sky whose levee we attend be our mutual surety of good faith? Ah, madame, let me but hear your name, if indeed you be a mortal, not rather some sweet goddess born each day with the dawn."

The words were extravagant with the extravagance of the age; but his voice was earnest, his manner full of delicate homage. The girl looked at him gravely, but her eyes smiled.

"No, sir," she answered demurely, "you mistake. I am no goddess, nor like to one. Your eyes are dazzled by the sunrise."

"Alas! madame, it's not the sunrise that dazzles me," he answered, and feasted his eyes on the swiftly blushing face. In silence she turned to leave him; but he persisted:

"Nay, madame, if I may not learn your name, then shall I indeed deem you not of mortal birth. What! you came from the trees, and in the trees you vanish! I vow the sunrise gives you life; you must be Daphne, the sweet nymph of the grove."

At that she turned, and stepped towards him eagerly, with shining eyes.

"What!" she cried, "you knew my father?"

"Your father, madame?" he stammered.

Her face fell.

"'Daphne' was ever his name for me," she murmured softly. "I dreamed perchance you knew him."

"Tell me his name," cried the Duke eagerly. But she shook her head, and turning from him vanished swiftly in the shadow of the trees.

The Duke stared after her. "So! she had a father," he muttered, with a sigh of relief. The surety of that seemed to give him infinite satisfaction.

If she had a father, she must be a woman, and a woman may be wooed.

All that day the Duke sought her, but he sought her in vain; nowhere did he behold the tall, straight figure, the delicate face, and the wealth of red-gold hair. He had proved her woman; but how came it that woman so fair hid her beauty so closely?

But again at sunrise he found her in the meadow, and to-day she did not turn away as heretofore, but waited for a moment hesitating, then turned and faced him boldly.

"Sir, you have doubtless read in the Scriptures the parable of the ewe lamb?" she began.

"I fear, madame, my reading has not lain much in that direction," he answered her solemnly. "But I know to what you refer."

"Will you then play the David, and rob me of my one joy?"

"Madame, had I but the right to give you all the joys the world can offer——"

She stopped him quickly.

"It will doubtless seem strange to you, sir, but this morning pilgrimage of mine has been, for the last two months, the joy of my day. My father——" she hesitated, "he was an Oxford scholar, and an artist; 'twas he who taught me to love the dawn. While he lived we were ever wont to watch the sunrise together; and it seems he is near me when I watch it now. I had almost thought it his spirit when first you said 'Amen' to my prayer. For the rest," she added bitterly, "this is my one peaceful hour in this great world of London; would you deprive me of it?"

"God forbid, madame," he answered gently. "Why should you dream it?"

She stared at him.

"Yet, sir, how can I continue to come here if—if——"

She paused, hesitating.

"If I come also?" he asked, smiling.

She blushed and nodded.

"But, madame," he urged, "is not the meadow large enough for two?"

"It is not that, sir."

"Or have you a monopoly of the sunrise?" he asked again, still smiling at her.

"Oh!" she cried impatiently, "you understand me well enough."

"You fear prying eyes and cruel tongues, madame?"

"No," she answered proudly; "for the evil thoughts of others I neither fear nor care."

He drew a step nearer and looked into her eyes.

"Then, madame, you fear me?" he asked gravely.

She stood silent; but she did not drop her eyes before his glance.

"I know not wherein I have deserved your mistrust," he continued. "And for the rest, think you I have so much joy in life that I can lightly give up my one hour of peace?"

She started and looked at him in surprise.

"I did not know you cared," she stammered. "I deemed——" She stopped suddenly.

"You deemed I came here but to annoy you, madame? I perceive you have spoken the truth; you are indeed a woman. Yet I swear to you that, like you, I live the day through for this hour."

"Since when, sir?" she asked demurely. "These two long days?"

He smiled in appreciation of her quickness.

"Madame, you are severe. Yet seeing you have enjoyed this pleasure all your life, and I but two days, should it not be you to deny yourself—if indeed we cannot find room here for the two of us? But," he continued quickly, "seeing I had rather die than deprive you of a moment's pleasure, it shall be as you will. If you command me, I

will leave this Eden now, never to return. Yet," he added softly, "if you will have pity, and let me come, I swear never to speak to you unless you grant me leave; never to follow you, and never to seek to know even your name. Will you not trust me, madame?"

He paused: again their eyes met, and she bowed her head.

"I am content," she murmured, and was gone.

And so, day by day, they met in the pure freshness of the morning to pay homage to returning day. And for a week he kept his promise; they met and parted in silence. But on the seventh day Nature excelled herself, painting the heavens so gloriously that even he, lover though he was, was moved to forgetfulness.

"How a man wastes his life!" he cried. "Who would have dreamed that here in London one may see such a sunrise as even Venice herself could not surpass?"

She turned to him eagerly.

"You know Venice?" she cried.

"Ay! and love it, madame," he answered gladly.

She smiled. "My mother was a Venetian. She died when I was a child; yet my father ever loved it for her sake, and I love it for its own."

"'Tis a city of love," he said softly, "and, therefore, meet to be loved."

Her eyes glowed as he voiced her girlhood's dream of Venice.

The next day it was she who broke the silence to ask him what more of Italy he knew: she had wandered there for years with her artist-father, and loved it as a home. And he, seeing how her eyes glowed at recollection thereof, talked to her of his travels in Italy and Germany, and led her to talk of her own childhood's wanderings with her father, that strange, dreamy genius whom she so dearly loved, who had taught her his one law for women: "Live pure and love truly," and his one prayer—for Light.

So it befell that day by day they talked together for the space of half an hour or more in the early hours of the morning. For seeing he had kept his promise for a week she trusted him for ever (so easily may woman's trust be

won!); and perhaps she had read his heart, and knew as well as he how deeply he was tempted further to break his word. But talking with her thus, day by day, learning the purity and simplicity of her soul, his strange reverence for her increased, while she, poor child, meeting sympathy, comprehension, and tenderness for the first time since her father's death, what should she do save love him with all her heart?

So love was born.

And every day he thought: "To-morrow I will claim her mine; for mine she shall be before all the world!" Yet when the morrow came, seeing he found the meetings and the mystery so sweet, and fearing to lose all by risking aught, he waited yet another day before he told his love. And she, reading the devotion in his eyes, desired no more, but was content to dream her life away in a dream that proved so dear.

At last, one morning in the early days of July he could no more restrain his passion, but as she turned to leave him he took her in his arms and held her strained to his heart in a silence that voiced more eloquently than words the depth of his love. A shiver ran through her when she felt his arms about her, but she made no attempt to struggle against his embrace. She lifted her head and met his glance, reading the love in his face. Crimson she flushed, and yet she did not move, but lay in his arms gazing at him fascinated, a world of devotion glowing in the darkness of her eyes.

"Daphne! my beloved!" he whispered, and stooping kissed her lips.

She did not speak; her eyes said all her heart. Only she gave one low sigh of absolute content, and then, slipping from his embrace, she fled from the meadow in a strange desire to be alone, alone with her great joy.

And he let her go. Was there not to-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow? Was not all eternity their own?

When the Duke of Southwark strolled into White's rooms that evening he found the place in an unwonted

ferment. Even the card-tables were almost deserted, while the members crowded in a noisy group at the far end of the room, where Lord Wildmore sat, pen in hand, before a table strewn with papers.

"Here, Charlie!" cried Lord Petre, on catching sight of the Duke. "Here, man, come and take your luck with the rest. Here's Peter Wildmore staking his money on the virtue of the ten fairest women in town. Come on and win one hundred guineas!"

"Or lose them," remarked Lord Wildmore drily.

"Egad! our money's safe enough. Come on, Charlie, here are still four beauties going a-begging. Take your choice. Pity the fair Darcy's not on the list. Is she not one of the fairest, Wildmore?"

"The fairest and proudest women in London," corrected Lord Wildmore. "Her ladyship scarcely meets the requirements."

"And if she did, the devil in it you would never let Charlie take her on," laughed Lord March. "'Twere a clear hundred lost."

"Now, Southwark, make your choice," cried Sir Harry Ford. "I'm for Sybilla Seaton."

"Ten to one on Harry!" cried Lord Petre, and a roar of laughter followed.

Lord Seaton was playing *carté* at the far side of the room. He looked up quickly and half rose from his seat, then with a careless shrug of his shoulders he turned again to his game.

The Duke of Southwark stretched out his hand idly for the paper and ran his eyes down the list. Four names remained still unappropriated.

"Miss Belle Steward," he read; "that's Tom Harding's preserve, isn't it? I won't trespass."

"Not of course that there would be the least doubt of your succeeding if you did," cried Sir Thomas, in an aggrieved tone, whereat there was much laughter; for Sir Thomas, alack! was a most unsuccessful suitor to the lady, but one constant in hope, and scornful of all other rivalries.

"Lady Esdaile" continued the Duke—then he stopped,

and looked quickly at Sir Antony Esdaile, who sat near, idly shuffling the cards. "Who have you taken up, Tony?" he asked.

"I don't happen to be in any pressing need of one hundred guineas at present," answered Esdaile coolly, dealing out the cards. "You can have my chances."

"Lady Esdaile," murmured Lord Charles Acton. "I know one man in London who couldn't win her favour, charm he never so wisely."

Sir Antony flushed slightly. "Who d'ye mean?" he asked indifferently.

"Her husband."

There was a roar of laughter.

"He had you there, Tony," cried Sir Harry. "It's a queer thing, you know," he added thoughtfully, "how devilish impossible it seems for a man to woo his wife. I have not had an opportunity to try it yet, but I'm deuced doubtful if even I could do it. I've almost a mind to get married and try."

"Oh, don't sacrifice yourself, Harry,—you'd find it a plaguey dull life," said Mr Clarke feelingly.

"Will no one take Lady Esdaile?" cried Lord Wildmore impatiently.

Sir Antony stood silent, gazing moodily on the cards: suddenly he roused himself and turned to face Lord Wildmore. "I'll take her," he said quietly, and then he turned again to the card-table.

"What! you, Tony?" cried Lord Petre. "What a sweet picture of conjugal felicity! Behold! the 'Rake Reformed!'" and he joined heartily in the laughter that followed his jest.

But Sir Antony was as unmoved by their laughter as he was by their scorn: he knew that he had staked higher than any man there, for the stake was his life's happiness. Again the Duke of Southwark turned to the list.

"Miss Pamela Plunkett," he read. "No, thank you!"

A roar of laughter greeted this, the ninth rejection of this defiant damsel.

"A guinea on it you will find no one to face Miss Pamela," cried Sir Harry.

"Done," answered Lord Wildmore, with a quick glance towards where Mr Fytch sat, dicing with Lord Grey, yet obviously lending his ears to the discussion: Lord Wildmore had much experience of Irishmen.

"'Dorothy Lascelles,'" read the Duke, coming to the last name upon the list. "Who is Dorothy Lascelles?"

"The fair Darcy's companion, *protégée*, tame saint,—what you will," answered Lord Petre.

"The devil she is! Why is she down here?" drawled Mr Steward, haughtily pointing to the list.

"She answers the requirements," said Lord Wildmore coolly.

"Ay! that she does," cried Sir Harry ruefully. "The girl's deuced pretty, a wonder, and as proud as Lucifer. You'll win your money on her, Wildmore."

"What is she like?" asked the Duke.

"Tall, black eyes, yellow—no, red—no, brown hair," began Sir Harry, enumerating her points doubtfully. "Here, Jack, you know her well enough—you tell him."

"You'd have seen her at Lucille Darcy's if you hadn't been so deuced eager to avoid her ladyship of late, Charlie. You have not been near her house for a month, and I wouldn't advise you to risk a visit now," laughed Lord March. "But for Dorothy—here, Cleeves! you are a poet and you have seen her; tell the Duke what Dorothy Lascelles is like."

But Viscount Cleeves smiled and shook his head.

"She reminds me of Venice in sunrise—all pearl and gold," he said. "Her hair is a gold-red glory, like an autumn beech in strong sunlight."

The Duke started. "I'll take her," he said suddenly.

"Gad! the hair has caught him," laughed Lord Petre. "Be careful, Charlie; that colour is always monstrous shrewish."

"You are one hundred guineas out of pocket, Charlie," said Sir Harry gravely. "I've tried her."

During the burst of laughter called forth by this self-assurance Mr Fytch rose from his seat, and, crossing behind Lord Wildmore, leaned over his shoulder and tapped with his finger on the paper where Miss Pamela Plunkett's name stood out in splendid isolation.

"I'll trouble you for one hundred guineas on that account in three weeks' time," he said coolly, and walked back to his game.

The Duke of Southwark repented of his wager directly he had taken it, for what had he to do now with any woman save one? Yet it was at worst but the loss of one hundred guineas, and if it should indeed prove true (what he had for a moment dreamed) that London held but one woman with such a golden glory of hair, why, then—but he dismissed the thought with scorn. What had she, his pure Daphne of the sunrise, to do with Lucille Darcy, with Sir Harry Ford?

But the following night at Lady Hopewood's rout the Duke of Southwark learned the truth.

The day had dawned in a storm of wind and rain, his goddess had not ventured to the meadow; he had not seen her since that blissful hour when her eyes had spoken clearly of her love. He found her here, enthroned among those ten fairest women, waiting for him to seek that favour upon which he had staked his guineas.

He stood aloof and watched her, his mind dark with suspicion. Beautiful she was, despite the simplicity, almost poverty, of her dress, a marked contrast to her companions' glories. Innocent she looked, her dark eyes roving over the gay throng in the rooms, wonder and fear in her glance. And yet she was there, side by side with Clarissa Winston, and she was Lady Darcy's companion! Can innocence live in such a company? A thousand disturbing questions dimmed his faith. Had she by chance known him all the time,—known and sought to entrap? Had the simplicity, the sweetness of her dawning love, been but a well-baited hook, lowered to catch his dukedom? Was she innocent, or (since suspicion leads a man far from probability) was she perhaps Lady Darcy's lure to lead him back to her side, playing the jackal's part? Had he found his perfect woman, or was she but as the rest of them—only perchance more clever? So he mused, hoping, doubting; for he had great possessions.

He was roused from his musings by a tap on the shoulder.

Lady Darcy stood before him, her dark eyes gleaming with mischief.

"Your Grace is monstrous distraught to-night," she began gaily. "Is it that you deem your stake too high for the reward?"

He looked into her black eyes with a slow smile. Here at least was a woman who was no hypocrite; there could be no two opinions regarding her. He read her clearly, and a desire came over him to play upon her.

He looked across at Dorothy Lascelles ere he replied.

"The stake too high, madame?" he answered rapturously. "No, in truth! What price could merit such reward?"

Lady Darcy snapped her fan-sticks.

"Lud!" she cried, "what fools men be! And all for Dorothy Lascelles! Your Grace prefers an easy road!"

"Shall I win my wager, then?" he asked.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"How can I tell? The pursued will always fly, and favours sought are not bestowed for nothing."

Laughing mockingly she left him.

But he, as he watched her go, mused on the words of the text: "Touch pitch and be defiled." He muttered again as he watched Dorothy's lovely face: "Lady Darcy's companion and a friend of Clarissa Winston," and his faith in her died.

So he vowed to prove the girl during the weeks to come; to watch her, to woo her; to learn whether she be innocent child or skilled huntress. He would seek her favour as he had wagered; but should she surrender to his suit he would judge her false,—false, since if she had loved the man truly he knew she would give no favour to the duke. So would he prove her. Then if he won his wager he would lose his love; but if he lost his wager he would win his heart's desire, and find a woman worthy of his life's worship. So he resolved, for the devil stirred him to a bitter distrust, and looking to the end for reward he thought little of her suffering.

But to Dorothy Lascelles the day had brought bitter misery.

Awakened from her sweet dream of love by a strange summons to Lady Betty Acton's house, she had found herself suddenly raised to notoriety, and her mind was in a whirl concerning this unknown Duke of Southwark who had vowed to win her favour. Though she shrank with dread from thought of possible persecution, she could not but feel amused at the change which had come over her life, and she smiled happily to think that she, too, was deemed one of the fairest and proudest women in London.

Then followed the strange evening at Lady Hopewood's rout, whither her mistress had taken her at Lady Betty's special request. It was an evening of loneliness and bewilderment, till on a sudden she beheld her lover in the crowd, and all else was forgotten in the joy of his near presence. And then—the revelation! For, as she raised her hand to sign to him, Miss Plunkett, that intrepid damsel, whom she half-admired, half-feared, stepped before her, and whispered sharply—

"What, miss! would you give way so soon?"

Dorothy looked at her in bewilderment.

"I protest I do not understand you, madame," she answered.

"What! were you not even now about to beckon to the Duke of Southwark?"

"Madame!" cried Dorothy with dignity, "you mistake me. I do not even know the Duke by sight, how then could I beckon to him? I—I did but bow to an acquaintance."

"An acquaintance! I knew not that you had any such here," said Pamela, with unintentional insolence. "Where is he?"

Dorothy frowned angrily, but answered quietly enough: "Yonder he stands by the doorway, in white brocade. He has just spoken to my Lord March."

"But that is the Duke of Southwark himself," cried Pamela. Then she looked at Dorothy curiously. "You know him and yet you do not know him," she said. "Best be careful, child. The Duke is no safe plaything, if all accounts be true."

But Dorothy flushed crimson, her heart surged with

misery and shame. She understood Miss Plunkett's warning: if he were indeed the Duke of Southwark, this man to whom she had given her love, what could she be to him, save that at which her heart raged to think? She knew the gulf between them. If this were indeed the Duke of Southwark, then surely he had taken up the wager in mockery of her innocence; he had wooed her for sport, to pave the way for easy victory, and he must deem her one whose favour it was a simple thing to win. As she mused thus she fell into a great rage and shame, and it seemed to her she hated him and all the world.

But when, the evening over, she was alone in the peace and silence of her chamber, then all that sweet dream of love which she had woven there since first she saw him, all the sweet prayers for him those walls had heard, all the sweet hopes which she had cherished while yet she deemed his love as true as hers,—all these came back to her, and she knew that indeed she loved him and must ever love him. Yes, though he had deceived her, though he mocked her, though he scorned her; though his love were an insult and to yield to it death, yet she loved him and must ever love him.

Then, knowing that love must live though the dream was dead, she sank on her knees with a passionate cry of helplessness. And before her stretched the future, grey and blank: a life of loneliness, a life growing old in thankless service, in that bitterest of all positions, the dependent who knows no comrade and can claim no friend. And behind her lay the past, full of bright hopes of happiness and those sweet maiden dreams of home and husband, and the tender kisses of children. And the present was only love and desire. Bitterly she sobbed: "Oh, God! is it indeed false? Can such love be false?" and in the darkness there seemed no light save the dim memory of her mother and the commandment her father had left her: "Live pure, love truly."

So she sobbed, till sleep brought her peace.

When she awoke, the moon with its tempting witchery had waned, and in the dim grey of morning her pride awakened and her strength returned; for, seeing she had

ever lived pure in thought, her love was pure and strong. Yet knowing her weakness she prayed for strength to flee temptation, vowing that neither look nor word of his should lead her to forget the distance it behoved her to place betwixt herself and him.

The next day they met once more at sunrise. Yet how different this meeting from the last! for his love was darkened by suspicion of her faith, and her heart was stirred with anger that he had deceived her. He believed her a schemer eager to enmesh his wits and win his title: she deemed him but one of love's jesters, sporting with her heart and staking his guineas on the easy winning of her favour.

And yet love is strong! At sight of her there, in the pure freshness of the morning, at the near presence of her beauty, the Duke forgot for the nonce all his suspicions. He poured forth his heart to her in a passion of wooing.

"Daphne, my beloved," he whispered. "Come to me, come, and together we will go to Italy, to your land of sunshine and of joy. I know a house high among the olives, above the whispering waters of the sea. We will sit among the roses and hear the crickets call. We will see the oranges glow like stars in the dark shadows of their leaves; we will watch the sun sink in the dreaming west and the moon climb over the hill. And all the day and all the night, my beloved, shall be love—love—love. Come to me, Daphne, Daphne of the Grove."

Rigid she stood, with clasped hands and parted lips, her dark eyes seeing as in a vision the land she loved so well. Ah! if he were but true!

"Come and I will take you to your city of love," he continued softly,—*"to Venice, the golden land. We will lie side by side in the gondolas and drift through the Grand Canal where the glow of the sunlight will die in the glory of your hair, my sweet. We will steal in the shadows of the silent waters by the dark palace walls, where men may live to love and value nought beside. And at night we will sail over the stillness of the lagoon, till all the world dies in a mist of darkness and only we*

two are left, we two and love. Through the silent night we will watch the stars, we two in a world of worlds, till Venice rise again from the sea in the crystal and gold of the sunrise. Come to me, Daphne; the wide world is before us, for what is life save love?"

He put his arms about her. For a moment she stood silent, as in a trance. Then she turned and looked steadily into his eyes.

"Your Grace forgets," she said, in a hard voice. "You are the Duke of Southwark. I am Lady Darcy's *dame de compagnie*."

His hands dropped to his side and he stepped back. Had he forgotten? He hardly knew. Only her words, the very mention of Lady Darcy's name, recalled all his suspicions. He stood silent, gazing moodily on the ground.

But Dorothy was quick to read the change in his face, and her last hope died. It was then as she feared, his wooing was but a jest, to pave the way for the winning of his wager. A sudden anger shook her at his daring thus to trifle with her.

Words of reproach rose to her lips, but her pride checked them. She could not endure that he should know he had wounded her; he must never know his jest had succeeded,—never know but what her love had been, even as his, a mockery.

One moment she stood silent, then she broke into a low, mocking laugh.

"Lud!" she cried, and her manner was an exact copy of Lady Darcy's. "It were surely a poor compliment to so notorious a wooer as your Grace to yield my favour at the first assault."

Then, feeling her voice breaking in a sob, she turned from him and ran across the meadow to the shadow of the grove, but paused to wave him a gay farewell ere she disappeared.

He looked after her in sullen rage, certain now that she had played with him from the first, resolved to treat her henceforth as she deserved,—to win his wager and then let her go by for ever.

But though Dorothy had fled from him in anger her

anger soon rolled in a flood of misery. For she loved him. All day long as she went about her duties, waited upon Lady Darcy, combed the lap-dog, or fed the parrots, still she saw the sunlight weaving fancies in the grey shade of the olive trees; she breathed the scent of the hot sunshine and the spice-laden breeze; she heard again the hum of the insects and the soft whisper of the waves kissing the land she loved. And all night long, as she lay in the cold moonlight, she heard the dreamy cry of the gondoliers; she saw the lagoon reflecting the myriad eyes of the heavens; she felt his arms about her and his kisses on her lips.

But in the grey morning she awoke to a passion of sobbing, crying on her knees: "Oh, God! if love be so sweet wherefore dost Thou deny it? Can love indeed be false, for I love him with all my heart?"

And after that she went no more to the meadow.

On the fourth day of the wager the Duke attended Lady Darcy's levee, and waited until all other guests had departed, and she was seated at her toilet. Lady Darcy eyed him mockingly.

"How goes your Grace's quest?" she asked. "Who will win the guineas?"

"Time must show," he answered coolly. "Up to the present Miss Lascelles has not honoured me with her favour."

She laughed scornfully.

"It would seem the girl's not altogether a fool," she said.

"What do you mean?" he asked sharply. "What would you do in her place?"

"Lud! what she does, I suppose,—raise my price at every onslaught. Every woman has her price, you know." Then suddenly her face grew soft; she leaned towards him and looked up at him tenderly from under her lashes. "Should I, Duke?" she whispered. "Should I? If you desired my favours, what would be my price?" And she put her face very near to his and pouted her lips invitingly.

He eyed her coldly, and in a moment she broke into a soft, mocking laugh.

"Lud! Duke, and you would win a woman!" she cried scornfully. "Why do you not study the art?"

"I think I am so doing," he said, and smiled at her whimsically.

She flushed. "What do you want?" she asked sharply.

"I want to see Miss Lascelles."

"Why should I permit it?" she asked provokingly.

"Because I ask it," he answered coolly.

"Oh! you men are amazing," she cried scornfully. Then she looked at him sideways and smiled.

"Be sure if I permit it, Duke, I will ask my reward," she said.

"I wish to have opportunity to see Miss Lascelles whenever I choose," he continued, ignoring her remark.

"I don't choose to have Dorothy persecuted," she said demurely. "But I will send her to you to discuss the affair of the wager; she has a right to fix her own terms—of surrender."

"You are sure of her surrender?" he asked gravely.

"Lud! Duke, who is Dorothy that she should deny where I would——" She stopped and glanced up at him mischievously, then with a quick laugh she left him to his doubts. But she had hardened his heart to the part he wished to play.

Presently Dorothy appeared. She curtsied to him distantly, without raising her eyes.

"Madame," he began ceremoniously, "it were foul shame that any wish of yours should go ungranted, or that beauty such as yours should go unadorned. Take these, child, and dream it is your birthday. If you wish more, they are yours for the asking—nay, all that money can buy is yours if you will but have it so, Daphne of the Grove."

She made no answer, but stood white and rigid while he drew from a packet a string of pearls and a shawl of Venetian lace as delicate as spider's web.

"The pearls are not whiter than your brow, nor the lace softer than your lips, sweet," he said. "Take them, and give me but a smile for my reward."

But she, stung to a sudden fury that he should think she would take his gifts when she had refused his love, flung

the pearls to the ground, and burying her fingers in the delicate lace, rent it in shreds. Then she sped from the room silent as she had come, leaving him amazed at her passion, and shamed indeed at the part which he had played.

But when he had gone she crept once more to the room, and gathering up the shreds of lace she bore them to her chamber, and there kissed them passionately, weeping bitterly the while, and crying with pitiful entreaty—

"Oh, father! had you no easier law to leave your girl? For to live pure 'twould seem I may not love; and if I love truly, how then can I live purely? For I love him with all my heart."

She loved him with all her heart, and yet her heart was enraged against him. She had no further doubt now that his love had been a mockery, that he thought of her but as a creature to sport with; and though at times she was tempted to forgive him all, she hardened her heart with the memory of his insult, and strove against her longing for his love.

The Duke was puzzled at her coldness, her resistance. At times he grew ashamed of his doubts, and would have put an end to his proving; but anon he would see Lady Darcy whispering with the girl, or note her familiar converse with Lord March. And again he would harden his heart, and looking upon her resistance rather as a sign of her cunning (for he had vast acquaintance with the wiles of the sex), he would not believe her true.

Day by day he wooed her—now tenderly, now mockingly, now passionately; but she, though her heart leaped at his voice, remembered his wager and kept her vow—neither looking at him nor answering him, save in suchwise as courtesy demanded.

And still—triumphing in her resistance—still he persecuted her.

But wooing her the Duke was in turn wooed by Lady Darcy. It was not for nothing she allowed him to haunt her house, let him see Dorothy daily; for so she won his attendance at her levee, his company to dinner, his escort

to drum and rout. And ever she wooed him with a quick softening of voice for him alone, with a prettily discreet show of shoulder or ankle, with a tender sigh or mocking smile. Yes; though she could not blind herself to his indifference, still she wooed him, shielding herself from rebuff by her ready mockery.

And so they came to the last day of the wager.

Now on that day Lord and Lady Hastings had a great company to their house, near Kilburn, to while away the long summer hours wandering in the beautiful gardens and drinking tea in the summer-houses, to finish the day with cards and dancing when the heavy falling dew should drive the visitors indoors.

It was a notable gathering of the wit and beauty of the town, and Lord Wildmore's chosen Fair were much in evidence.

The centre of a laughing group stood Lord Petre, proudly displaying the jewel-cased lock of the infuriated Miss Fermor, disarming by his ever-ready quips the indignation of her feminine supporters; while on the edge of the group stood young Mr Pope listening to the Amazonic fury, gathering the matter for his world-renowned poem.

Hither came Miss Steward, closely followed by Sir Thomas Harding—still unsuccessful, still hopeful, still aggrieved at the universal assurance of his ultimate failure.

Miss Pamela Plunkett kept her house; but Mr Fytch came gaily to Kilburn, his happy smile and assured air of one whose work is well accomplished bringing doubt and consternation to such as had staked their guineas upon the hopelessness of his quest.

Lady Sybilla Seaton, too, was absent; but Sir Harry Ford was there, flitting like a busy moth from group to group. He wore an air of gentle melancholy, being much depressed by the secret knowledge of this his first failure; but as he mingled in the throng and heard the many bets in surety of his victory, he derived much consolation from the thought of his friends' assured losses.

Lady Winston was there, making a great to-do about her bracelet; Cecilia Darblay talked with Mr Addison, and

threw side-glances at Lord Soames; while Lady Margaret Beauchamp, the centre of a notable group of Tories, waited with ill-concealed impatience for the arrival of Viscount St John.

Last of all came Lady Darcy. With her came Dorothy Lascelles, and lo! the assembly was complete.

"Here are all the honey-pots," said Lord Wildmore, at sight of the latest arrivals. "Now to watch the bees at work."

"I vow, my Lord, you deserve excommunication for having thus endeavoured to imperil our sex," cried Lady Betty Acton in a mighty indignation. "You deserve to lose the entire wager. You may rest assured, sir, that if any grant the favour sought, 'twill be from no lack of resolution, but rather from their desire to teach you a lesson through your purse."

"Madame, I never accused your sex of lack of resolution. The amount of determination that has been displayed these last three weeks had been sufficient to compass the betrothal of a dozen spinsters. I have heard of one unhappy bachelor who was pursued even to the sacred precincts of his chambers, and there——"

Lady Betty laid her fan upon his lips.

"I marvel, my lord, where you contrive to gather all this idle gossip," she remarked demurely.

"Egad! madame, have I not the honour to be acquainted with your ladyship?"

Lady Betty smiled unwillingly.

"You are a wretch, sir!" she cried. "I vow you deserve—you deserve to be married to the worst shrew in London; and, by Heaven! so you shall be, and I can compass it."

"What, madame, would you then poison Lord Charles?" he asked gravely.

Lady Betty eyed him with great scorn.

"I marvel you will still try to be witty, my lord," she said. "Nobody laughs," and, so saying, she walked away with great dignity; but a mischievous smile hung over her shoulder paid tribute to his victory.

The afternoon was far spent when at length the Duke of Southwark drew near to Dorothy Lascelles, where

she stood at Lady Darcy's side, talking to Sir Harry Ford.

"Madame," he began ceremoniously, "may I have the pleasure of leading you to the Italian garden? The roses are indeed a show."

"I thank your Grace," she answered coldly; "I have already seen them."

"What has Miss Lascelles to do with looking at the beauty of roses?" chimed in the ever gallant Sir Harry. "Has she not her mirror?"

Dorothy smiled. "At least, sir, I might profit by studying their use of the thorns," she answered.

"Heaven forbid, madame!" cried Sir Harry extravagantly. "Are not the wounds your eyes inflict sufficiently fatal? Would you seek yet further stings?"

Again the Duke intervened.

"Will you not walk in the shade, madame?" he pleaded. "The sun is monstrous powerful here."

"I thank your Grace, I do very well here," was her cold reply.

Sir Harry promptly plunged into the ramifications of a compliment concerning the lady's complexion which, while calculated to excite the sun's envy, was, alas! by its very nature, susceptible to injury from the sun's attacks. But the Duke turned away to Lady Darcy, Dorothy sadly following him with her eyes. How often of late had he left her for her protectress? What woman, even while shrinking from his persecution, had not known a moment's jealousy?

"Well, Duke," cried Lady Darcy with a little smile of mockery, "still seeking? still seeking? 'Tis a novel occupation for your Grace."

"True, madame, and like all such has its charms."

"Come with me to the Italian garden," she commanded, and gave him her hand. Together they crossed the lawn, followed by Dorothy Lascelles and Sir Harry Ford.

"The time is short," continued Lady Darcy; "has not your Grace lost hope?"

"Heaven forbid, madame! Is not hope love's food?"

She mused a little, then continued briskly: "Now you shall be granted one last chance to prove Lord Wildmore

in error." She turned to the couple behind. "Sir Harry, will you brave the thorns and pluck me some roses?" she asked.

"Madame, what are the roses' thorns to one who has dared to look into your eyes?" cried the ever-ready gallant, turning with alacrity to obey her wish.

"Dorothy," continued Lady Darcy, "I have left my fan in the grotto beyond the pergola. I will be vastly obliged if you will fetch it; doubtless his Grace will escort you."

"I will not trouble his Grace," answered the girl, flushing; but the Duke turned and walked by her side.

Then Lady Darcy turned to her companion.

"Sir Harry," she said mischievously, "would you learn how another man woos? Though, i' faith," she added with a laugh, "'tis to be conceded you haven't much to learn in the art."

"Why, what's afoot?" he asked in surprise.

"It is a double grotto, sir. Have you a mind to follow them and see his Grace win his wager?"

"With all my heart!" he cried. Sir Harry had never the slightest objection to witness to his wooing. The two crept away behind the pergola.

The Duke preserved a resolute silence as he accompanied Dorothy across the lawn and through the rose garden; but when they stepped into the cool shade of the empty grotto he turned and faced her.

"We need not seek long for Lady Darcy's fan," he said with a little smile. "I wager she has found it by now, in her hand."

"What does your Grace mean?" asked the girl sharply.

"Her ladyship is very kind, and—doubtless 'twas not hard for her to read my desires."

Dorothy flushed angrily. "Her ladyship is indeed monstrous kind," she answered bitterly.

"Pray be seated, madame," he continued; "I have something I desire to say to you."

"That may well be, your Grace, but I have no desire to hear it," she answered coldly nevertheless she sat at his bidding.

He crossed to her side, and stood a moment looking down at her tenderly.

"Poor little Daphne!" he whispered softly. "Are you grown very weary of Peleus's pursuit?"

"I have not much longer to weary in," she said quickly, striving by light words to still the wild beating of her heart. "Are not the spoils of Daphne laurel leaves to deck a conqueror's brow? After to-morrow there will be no more fame to be won by victory, and Daphne will have peace."

"Do you dream that indeed, Daphne?" he answered softly. "No, you know well my love was born long weeks before I took this wager. You know that, beloved?"

Lady Darcy, hiding with Sir Harry in the darkness of the farther grotto, looked up with a sudden frown of surprise.

"And further," continued the Duke, "when I took the wager I had not even learned your name. I took it—who knows why? For sport! I little dreamed that she whose favour I had vowed to win was none other than my sweet goddess of the sunrise, my adorable Daphne of the Grove."

Dorothy looked up quickly, a new hope in her breast; but she hardened her heart to resist him.

"And even so, your Grace," she answered coldly, "Daphne may soon hope for peace. Have you not likened yourself to Peleus? Is it not ever the function of a river to pass swiftly onward to other lands?"

"No, Daphne," he cried, with a sudden passion,—“No, by Heaven! I love you, and have ever loved you since first I beheld you, seven long weeks ago. Do you dream, child, those morning hours in the meadow were nothing to me? Have you so soon forgotten them, beloved?"

Lady Darcy's face had grown suddenly white, and her hands were fiercely clenched. It was as well the grotto was in darkness or Sir Harry's laughing eyes had learned too much.

"Have you forgotten those hours of sunrise, Daphne?" he whispered softly. "I love you, Daphne; do you not love me too?"

Her resolution failed her. A moment she raised her eyes to his—"You know I do," she whispered.

He started back and gazed at her in amazement. "You do, Daphne?" he cried in triumph.

Then she sprang to her feet, and stood before him, all the exaltation of her spirit burning in her eyes.

"Ah!" she cried, "I have hidden it so long; let me speak it now and then see you no more. Why should I resist longer? Why should I be ashamed of what I cannot help?—of what is my very soul? Yes, you may mock me, laugh at my simplicity—oh! I have been easily deceived; but it is true, I love you. Ah! how I love you. All the glory of earth and heaven is in my love for you. As I loved you when first I saw you so shall I love you all my life, for what is life save love?"

She stopped. For a moment they gazed at one another in silence; then her moment of exaltation, of forgetfulness, passed. She stood before him with piteously outstretched arms, her voice broke in a sob.

"Oh, if you know pity!" she sobbed, "leave me in peace."

He rose to his feet and stood very close beside her, looking down upon her bowed head. He would prove her for the last time.

"Would you indeed have me leave you, Daphne?" he asked softly. "Would you have me play the Peleus and pass you by for ever? Would you, beloved?"

A moment she stood silent, then she raised her head and faced him calmly.

"Yes, your Grace," she answered, "I would have it so."

He stooped to kiss her hand. "Thank God," he murmured reverently, "for a perfect woman."

Then he stepped back from her side and continued quietly, "So be it, Daphne, you shall have your way; but upon one condition. Meet me yet once again to-morrow in the meadow; let us have one more hour of Paradise; then, where we first met, we will part, for ever—if you will have it so, and I will persecute you no more."

The girl had learned her strength in those past three weeks; she no longer feared to trust herself with him.

"I am content," she answered, and passed out of the grotto.

But he followed her with a great joy in his heart, for now he waited but for the morrow, when in the glory of the morning, on the spot where he had first beheld her, he would confess to her his proving, and claim her his before the world.

Lady Darcy and her companion stepped out from the darkness of the grotto, and the lady shivered in the hot sunshine.

"A vastly pretty pastoral, I vow," she said, smiling upon Sir Harry, who looked somewhat bewildered at what had passed; it was not thus that he was wont to woo. "But, lud!" she continued, "how I have soiled my gown. I must to the house and find my woman to wash away the stain."

She tripped across the lawn, smiling most sweetly upon all whom she encountered. But when she reached the shadow of the house her face grew hard and cold.

She summoned her woman who had accompanied her from town; but she said nothing to her of stair or soil. Giving her gold she bade her seek out Lord March's groom, and engage his help in certain affairs upon which she had resolved. Well primed with her instructions, the faithful Mrs Adèle set off upon her errand, and again smiling sweetly, Lady Darcy returned to the merry throng in the gardens.

And now the sun had set, and the company hastening indoors the musicians gathered in the gallery, and the dance began. Many a time during the evening did Lady Darcy summon Lord March to her side, then turning to others left him to talk with Dorothy. Twice he danced with the girl, her ladyship entreating him to do so, seeing he danced little, and her *protégée* was acquainted with so few. But when the Duke saw these two so frequently together, he frowned with a sudden jealousy. For what woman, valuing her reputation, ever called Lord March her friend?

Not until the evening was far spent did he approach Dorothy; then, seeing her stand alone, he drew near and begged the honour of her hand in the minuet. She would

have refused him, but Lady Darcy turned on her sharply. "Dance with his Grace, girl," she said, "and be grateful for the honour;" and, blushing, she submitted to be led out to dance in the famous "Minuet au Cœur."

Half an hour later Lady Darcy and Dorothy Lascelles sat side by side in her ladyship's coach driving back to town. Both were silent, for Lady Darcy matured strange plans in her heart, and Dorothy gazed unseeing into the darkness of the night, musing on a hope now dead.

Suddenly, when they were but a little way from home, Lady Darcy broke silence.

"Has the Duke of Southwark won his wager?" she asked sharply.

"No," answered Dorothy proudly, "nor will he again seek it."

"Tut! you little prude, why don't you grant what he asks?" The girl turned and looked doubtfully at her mistress.

"Because I love him," she answered softly.

Lady Darcy laughed scornfully.

"You love!" she cried. "What do you know of love, you passionless little fool? And if you do dream you love him, what then? What do you expect?"

"Nothing, my lady. I neither expect nor desire aught—save only to love him," she added softly.

There was a moment's silence, then Lady Darcy continued in a gentler voice,—

"Look you, Dorothy, you are a good girl, and I will help you. My Lady Arlingham is going down to the country—her physicians have ordered her rest. She requires a companion, and I have promised that you shall go with her, if you suit her taste. You are not fit for a town life, but in the country you may do well enough. We pass by her house in the next street. I will set you down there to speak with her, and send a chair for you in half-an-hour."

"Would her ladyship wish me to wait upon her at so late an hour?" asked Dorothy timidly.

"She expects you. She leaves for the country in two

days, so she has but little time for preparation. I have promised her you shall be with her this evening."

"I am very grateful to your ladyship," answered the girl: a moment later they stopped before the house.

Mrs Adèle alighted and talked some minutes with the man who opened the door, then she returned to the coach.

"Yes, my lady," she said, "it is quite right. Her ladyship is awaiting Miss Lascelles."

"Be quick, child," cried Lady Darcy, "the air is very chill."

Dorothy sprang from the coach and hurried into the house.

Lady Darcy watched her disappear with a low, mocking laugh; then she signed to her coachman and drove away home.

On arrival she learned that the Duke of Southwark was waiting to speak with her. He had come in answer to a note from her ladyship which he had found at his house on his return from Kilburn. The note was urgent, hinting at matters of importance, and—all his thoughts being for Dorothy—he had not delayed a moment in obeying the summons.

Lady Darcy received him in her boudoir. She was elaborately dressed in a gown of soft yellow brocade, and looked very beautiful with the flush of excitement on her face.

The Duke of Southwark eyed her doubtfully, and glanced quickly round in search of Dorothy Lascelles.

"Will not your Grace be seated?" she asked with a grave ceremony.

"Why did you bid me come to you, madame?" he asked coldly, seating himself at some distance from the settee on which she sat.

Lady Darcy eyed him reproachfully; then with a little laugh she patted the seat beside her,—

"Come and sit here, Duke," she said, adding softly, "You were not wont to be so monstrous bashful."

The Duke gave an inward groan, the groan with which a man greets a woman's approach to a subject of which he has long since wearied. Nevertheless he rose, and crossing the room seated himself beside her.

Lady Darcy gave a little sigh of satisfaction, then leaning back she studied his face in silence.

"What would you with me here, madame?" he asked impatiently, gazing round the room.

"Does it then seem so monstrous strange to you to be here?" she whispered, and looked at him sideways under her lashes with a smile of reminiscence.

"Why did you send for me, madame?" repeated the Duke coldly, nor met her glance.

She gave a sudden soft laugh as though she mocked herself.

"Did I not tell you that I would one day ask my reward?" she asked gaily.

"Yes, madame, but did I ever tell you that I would give it?" he answered coolly.

"I wonder if you guess what I would ask?" she breathed softly.

He was silent. Suddenly she laughed again and put her face very near to his.

"Have I grown hideous, Duke?" she asked, "or do you fear me, that you will not look at me to-night?"

Then at last he turned and looked at her, where she sat in all the splendour of her beauty, a beauty softened and rendered a thousand times more alluring by the unwonted gentleness of her expression. Long he gazed at her, and she said no word, only entreated him with all the power of her pleading glances. Slowly he turned away.

Tears darkened her eyes. She leaned towards him and laid her hand on his.

"Duke," she whispered, "many men have loved me."

"I know it, madame," he answered her, "and you—have loved many."

She flushed, but did not drop her eyes.

"No, Duke," she whispered, "only one—only one," and again she touched his hand.

He rose abruptly. "Where is Dorothy Lascelles?" he asked.

She stared at him a moment, then her eyes flashed with anger, and she broke into a mocking laugh.

"Your Grace is but a poor wooer," she said scornfully.

"I marvel you have not yet learned Dorothy's price."



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He looked at her gravely. "Madame, her price is above rubies," he said softly.

Again the anger flashed across her face.

"Lud! your Grace is well grounded in the Scriptures," she cried scornfully. "But do not make too sure; you are not yet a Solomon. Come, Duke, I'll tell you a secret. Every woman has her price, but—it is not every man who can pay it."

He started. "What do you mean?" he asked sharply.

"Oh, lud!" she laughed, "nothing whatever. A mere jest. What should I mean?"

Then she arose suddenly, and crossing swiftly to his side she laid her hands on his arm, and with a quick blush looked up at him a moment shyly, then dropped her eyes.

"Ah, Duke," she whispered, "what should there be about you to make a woman love you so?"

Who so awkward as a man being wooed? "Madame! Lucille!" he stammered, and stood helpless.

She drew nearer. "Duke," she whispered, "do you not care? Do you not care that I love you?" And again her eyes filled with tears.

Then he took her hands in his, but held her from him.

"Lucille, this is folly! It is impossible," he said gently enough, though his eyes were angry.

She dropped her hands to her side, amazed.

"Impossible!" she cried. "Why so? What more would you have?"

"I would have Dorothy Lascelles for my wife," he answered quietly.

"For your wife! your wife!" she answered in amaze. "But why? Why?"

"Because, madame, she is the one woman I have met worthy to sit in my mother's place," he answered softly.

For one long moment she gazed on him silently, all the passion of her soul leaping to her eyes.

"Do you then deem her so spotless?" she asked slowly.

"I would stake my life upon her virtue!"

Then she broke into a low, mocking laugh.

"You fool, Duke!" she cried mockingly. "You fool!"

Do you know where she is at this moment, your virtuous woman? Shall I tell you whither she has gone, your spotless saint? She is in Lord March's house, alone with him. Oh, you fool! You fool!"

He strode forward and seized her wrists in a grip that made her wince; his eyes blazed.

"You are lying to me, you slut!" he cried hoarsely.

She looked in his face and laughed.

"Lying? No, Duke, it's the truth, sure enough. Did I not tell you 'twas not every man who could pay a woman her price? Lud! how easily you are fooled."

But Lady Darcy, when she laid her plans for weaning the Duke from his love for Dorothy Lascelles, had neglected to take into consideration a matter to which she persistently blinded herself, namely his hatred and distrust towards herself. Had all the world else told him of Dorothy's innocence he might still have doubted; but when Lucille Darcy hinted at her guilt all his love for the girl rose in fierce disbelief.

"You are lying to me," he repeated, in the low voice of suppressed anger.

She looked up at him and her brows puckered at sight of his white, set face.

"I don't understand you," she said lightly. "What do you want?"

"Where is Dorothy Lascelles?"

"I have told you; she is in Lord March's house," she answered quickly.

"If she be there she is with Lady March," he said sharply.

"I think not," answered Lady Darcy, with a low laugh; "her ladyship does not, as a rule, receive her husband's visitors."

He grasped her wrists tighter and continued in the same low, even voice.

"If she be there she has been entrapped into it."

"Entrapped? In London? In daylight? How were that possible?" she asked innocently, gazing at him wide-eyed.

He looked down at her steadily.

"Lucille," he said quietly, "I know you well enough to know that you are lying."

She flushed. "I vow it is the truth," she said stubbornly. Then she gave another low laugh. "A pretty reputation your Duchess will have."

His eyes blazed. "By heaven, woman! you shall tell me the truth."

"Shall!" she cried, with a mocking laugh.

She flung up her head and faced him defiantly; but her resolution wavered before the cold hatred in his eyes. Slowly her defiance vanished. She gave a sudden sob, and struggled to free her hands from his grasp.

"Oh, Charlie! don't look at me like that," she wailed. "I can't bear it. Charlie, I love you so."

"What do I want with your love, madame?" he asked scornfully. "I want the truth."

"No, no, Charlie," she pleaded.

She began to weep helplessly, the tears running down her face, making sad havoc with powder and paint: she could not free her hands to wipe them away. He watched her unmoved, still eyeing her with that look of cold anger and contempt. He held her wrists in a vice. His silence, her helplessness, worked on her overstrained nerves. Every moment she grew more unstrung, more hysterical. Never before had she felt herself at the mercy of any man, and this man she loved.

She set her teeth, determined to outweary him; but his patience was monumental. Then she mocked him.

"This is vastly entertaining for both of us," she laughed. "But, pray remember, your part is the pleasanter; you have my face to study, yours is a very poor substitute. You look absurd, Duke. Your peruke is awry and your cravat untied. How come you to see a lady so ill-attired? Is this a new pastime? I have heard that some folk find peculiar pleasure in holding hands; but I confess I am weary of the sport. Did you know you had a dimple in the middle of your chin? It is monstrous coy."

Still he stood silent, looking into her eyes. He had gauged her resistance well, and knew that silence was his best weapon.

She grew desperate.

"Oh, Charlie, let me go!" she pleaded hysterically. "This is impossible."

Suddenly he took a step towards her.

"Are you going to tell me the truth?" he asked sharply.

To her hysterical terror his voice was full of threats; she shrank back with a little scream, her resistance was overcome.

"Yes, yes," she cried, with a hysterical laugh, "I will tell you all. I took her there myself; she knew nothing of it. She is as innocent as a child. Was as innocent; but she has been the last hour alone with Lord March. Save her now—if you can!"

Without a word he dropped her wrists, and turning, strode from the room, followed by her hysterical laughter.

Peal after peal, ever louder, ever shriller, rang through the house. In vain her women sought with hartshorn and salts to soothe their mistress; she drove them from her. Rigid she crouched on the floor where she had fallen when he left her. Her love was vain; her hopes lay shattered; hour long she laughed in a bitter mockery.

For there comes a time when tears fail and a woman must laugh, or die.

Dorothy Lascelles entered the house at which Lady Darcy had set her down, and waited in the hall while the man shut and barred the door. She noted that he looked at her strangely, and she thought him indeed half-fuddled with drink, so that when he still delayed, fiddling with the bolts, she spoke to him sharply and bade him take her up to his mistress without further hesitation.

He turned, sulkily enough, at her words, and opening a small door on the right of the hall told her to wait there while he went to ask his lady's pleasure.

Dorothy accordingly sat down to wait patiently, but when twenty minutes had passed and no message came to her she grew uneasy. The house was strangely quiet. She opened the door and looked into the hall. There sat the servant, bottle in hand, gazing stupidly at the doorway where she stood. Dorothy's anger increased.

"What does this mean, fellow?" she asked sharply. "Have you taken my message to your mistress? Will she not see me now?"

The man eyed her sheepishly.

"Best stay where you are," he murmured sulkily.

"Nonsense, fellow," cried Dorothy, now thoroughly angry. "Go to Lady Arlingham at once and ask her pleasure. I will wait no longer."

He put down the bottle slowly, and turned to mount the stairs.

"You can come up," he muttered, looking back over his shoulder.

With some inward misgivings Dorothy followed him up the wide stairway. The landing above was very dark. Arrived at the top the man pointed to a closed door opposite the head of the staircase—

"Yonder is the room," he said, "you can go in."

"Open the door, sirrah, and announce me to her ladyship," she commanded haughtily.

"You can open it yourself," he answered insolently, and turned to descend the stairs.

Dorothy hesitated a moment, then as she could not obviously remain there all night, and as it seemed useless to bandy further words with a drunken fellow, she opened the door and entered the room.

The door fell to behind her, and she stood for a moment dazzled by the sudden light and amazed at the scene that met her eyes.

The long room was brilliantly lighted with candles. At the centre table sat four men playing cards, while a fifth, bottle and glass in hand, stood near, pouring out the wine. Two other men were dicing and drinking at a small table near the door. The floor was strewn with cards, empty bottles, and shattered glass; a discarded coat and an overturned chair added to the general air of disorder.

At the girl's sudden entry all the men looked up in astonishment; then Lord Denver reeled from his seat at the dicing board and slipped between her and the door.

"Yo, ho! A petticoat!" he cried with the view-halloo of

the Mohocks in pursuit. The other men laughed and rose to their feet.

"Why, itsh li'e Dorothy," cried Sir Harry Ford, dropping his glass in his amazement. Sir Harry had emptied the contents of many glasses during that evening's revel. "Itsh Lucille Darcy's companion, li'e Dorothy."

"Companion, eh?" laughed Lord Denver. "Egad! I've a vacancy for a companion if you'll fill the post, my charmer."

Dorothy shivered and drew away from him.

"There is some mistake," she stammered.

"Oh, thatsh a' right, Dorothy," hiccoughed Sir Harry. "Courshe there ish, my beauty. We all know that; there'sh alwaysh shome mishtake."

"I want my Lady Arlingham," she continued anxiously.

A roar of laughter greeted her words.

"Lady Arlingham! Hulloo, March! got the widow here too, eh? Seems it's a regular party," drawled Lord Petre. "How many more beauties have you hid in the place, you dog? One apiece, I trust, or I'll cry you a stingy rogue."

Dorothy turned eagerly to Lord March, who stood silent beyond the table, looking at her curiously.

"My lord," she pleaded, "please take me away."

"Ho, ho! it appears we're not wanted here, eh, Harry?" cried Viscount St John.

"Damned selfish dog, March! Always wash," said Sir Harry, shaking his head with a melancholy air.

Dorothy looked round quickly. Obviously Sir Harry was too riotously drunk to heed any plea. Of the other men, some she did not know, some she knew too well. Only Lord March remained for appeal. She crossed quickly to his side.

"My lord," she said with quiet dignity, "I shall be obliged if you will take me away."

For a minute he looked down on her in silence, marvelling at the meaning of her visit.

Then he took her hand. "Come this way, madame," he said, and led her to a second door leading into an ante-room. This he opened for her, and when she had passed through he followed, and shutting it behind him waiked

across the room and stood with his back against the opposite door, looking down at her with a quizzical smile.

Dorothy looked at him questioningly; then as he did not move she drew herself up and faced him with quiet dignity.

"What does this mean, my lord?" she asked quietly. "What do you want with me here?"

He smiled down at her. "What do you want with me?" he asked in return.

She flushed angrily. "I do not understand you, my lord. I came hither to see Lady Arlingham."

He laughed lightly. "Come, child, that tale will not even pass out there, least of all here—betwixt us two. What on earth should Lady Arlingham do here?"

"Is not this her ladyship's house?" she asked quickly.

"Not that ever I heard of," he answered coolly.

"Not—then who lives here?"

"I do. This is my house, madame, and I protest I'm vastly honoured by your visit."

A look of fear crept into her eyes, and she shrank back.

"Your house!" she gasped. "Your house, my lord?"

"Exactly! I confess," he drawled, "your visit was somewhat unexpected this evening—but I am none the less charmed to welcome you."

Dorothy stared at him in growing amazement.

"But, my lord," she stammered, "there is some grave mistake. Lady Darcy brought me here. I was to see my Lady Arlingham here to-night before she leaves for the country. Perhaps she li'es next door. Lady Darcy must have mistaken the house——"

"Lady Darcy must have mistaken—the house and many other matters," answered Lord March coolly. "Lady Arlingham's house lies at the other side of London: moreover, her ladyship left for the country several days ago."

"What do you mean?" she cried quickly.

"Simply, madame, that Lady Darcy knows this house well, and knows who lives here. Shall we try another story?"

"Oh! but it's impossible, impossible!" she cried. She did not note the mockery in his voice, being so occupied in

crushing the doubt his words awoke in her own mind. "My lord, I must trouble you to call a chair and let me go home at once."

"Home!" he began slowly. "Egad! Dorothy, I'm mightily afraid that is a place you will have some difficulty in finding."

"What do you mean?" she demanded sharply.

"I'm afraid, madame," he answered, with a slow smile, "you don't clearly appreciate Lady Darcy's little prejudices. Not quite clearly, madame."

She stood silent, gazing at him wide-eyed. He continued slowly, eyeing her mockingly the while.

"You see, my child, Lady Darcy has her own reputation to protect. To retain as her companion a lady who—though undeniably charming—has—er—done me the honour to visit me at this late hour, would hardly be to her credit. I'm just afraid, madame, Lady Darcy's house will no longer be open to you."

"But she brought me here herself," urged the girl impatiently.

"Such is indeed your story, madame," he answered slowly. "I have ventured to advise the consideration of a more convincing one."

She stared at him a moment in surprise, then her eyes flashed with indignation.

"Do you not believe me, my lord?" she asked sharply.

He looked down at her for a moment in silence.

"Upon my soul, madame, I don't know," he said slowly.

"But you must know, my lord," she answered angrily.

"You must know at once, please. Heaven above us," she cried, pacing the room in her indignation, "do you not see? I am here—in your house—and at this hour—and, if what you say be true, I have been entrapped here by the only friend I have in the world. What share you have in this, my lord, I do not know——"

"I knew nothing of it, upon my honour," he interrupted.

She looked at him earnestly.

"I believe you," she said. "You will oblige me by giving my word equal credence. Ah! but we are wasting time." She broke out again impatiently: "The situation is intoler-

able. Where can I go? What can I do? My lord, you must help me; you are responsible for this impossible situation."

"I responsible!" he gasped, in amaze.

"Certainly! It is your house," she answered, with true feminine reasoning. "You must protect me."

"But, madame——"

Again she turned on him imperiously.

"No buts, my lord; I place myself entirely in your hands. Now——" seating herself calmly, "how will you help me?"

Lord March gasped with surprise. Such whole-hearted confidence in his good faith amazed him. Never before had a woman turned to him for chivalrous protection; but this girl intrusted herself to him as a matter of course. Was she innocent above measure, or wise with a wisdom beyond that of any of her more world'-read sisters? He knew not. Only he thought no more of doubting her sincerity. He could only gaze on her in admiration and mutter softly, "Gad! what a duchess she would make."

Dorothy tapped the floor with her foot impatiently.

"Well, my lord?" she urged.

Impetuously he crossed the room and sat beside her.

"'Pon my soul!" he cried, "you're splendid. Never fear! I'll help you, child. Come, tell me all about it."

She turned to him with a grateful smile, when on a sudden the door opened and Lady March accompanied by Miss Evelina Steward entered the room.

They stood for a moment, gazing in amazement at the couple; then Lady March moved swiftly to her husband's side.

"Who is this woman, my lord?" she asked coldly.

Lord March hesitated. "It is—er—Miss Lascelles, Lady Darcy's companion," he began doubtfully.

Miss Steward sniggered. "Lud!" she cried, "I always knew Lucille Darcy was vastly—er—liberal; but I scarce believed she lived in company with a common——"

"Madame!" cried Dorothy, with blazing eyes.

"Oh! don't speak to me, miss," cried Miss Steward, tossing her head and drawing in her skirts.

Lady March still stood with her eyes fixed on her husband's face.

"My lord," she said, in a low tone, "can you explain to me the reason of this—person's presence in my house?"

"No, my lady," he answered quietly, "I cannot. But she is a lady whom I am honoured to receive."

"That will do, my lord," answered Lady March coldly. Their eyes met in a defiant glance. Without another word she turned and left the room, followed by Miss Steward, scornfully tossing her curls.

Lord March looked after his wife and gave a short, hard laugh. Then he turned away with a reckless shrug.

But Dorothy watched the women retire with blazing eyes and crimson cheeks.

"My lord," she cried, "this is intolerable; I will not remain here another instant!"

"Nonsense, child!" he answered sharply. "Where can you go?"

"I must go home at once."

"But I thought we had agreed that 'home' would be a somewhat difficult place for you to find?"

"Then, my lord, I must go elsewhere," she answered impatiently.

"I have always understood Lady Darcy was your only protector?" he said gravely.

The girl bowed her head.

"Then 'elsewhere' may prove no more easy a place to find. I protest, Dorothy, it behoves us to give more serious consideration to your future. There is a long future before you, and, egad! it seems blank enough."

"I will not stay here another instant," she repeated obstinately.

"Nonsense, child!" he cried angrily, "you must remain here—there is no alternative. I will go and see Lady Darcy—and——"

With blazing eyes she interrupted him.

"Never, my lord!" she cried, with sudden fierceness. "I had rather die first."

"Yes—but you see it is not a question of death, madame," he said drily.

She turned to him with sudden piteous pleading. "Oh, let me go!" she cried.

"Go? Where?" he asked impatiently. "Out into the streets? No, no, my child, you are much too beautiful to be thrown to the Mohocks. Why, child," he continued, "think what's before you! Who would employ you now? What could you do?"

"I could at least starve," she answered desperately.

"Assuredly," he answered drily. "But—er—starving isn't pleasant. Come," he added impatiently, "be reasonable. You cannot wander the town alone. You shall stay here, and I will—er—gad! I'll go and tell my wife your story, and she *shall* believe it. If not——"

"If not? if not, my lord?" interrupted the girl, beside herself with fury. "Heavens! Do you imagine I will expose myself again to the alternative? I will *not* go to your wife. I will not remain here." She turned to the door. Lord March stopped her.

"You must, madame," he said sharply.

Dorothy stamped with rage; her judgment was blinded by her fury at the insult she had endured. "Will you dare to prevent me?" she cried angrily.

"I certainly will not assist you to leave the house," he answered stubbornly.

"Then I must help myself," she cried abruptly, and turning she ran across the chamber, and darted through the unguarded door into the room beyond, leaving Lord March staring helplessly after her.

But alas for Dorothy! In her anger she had entirely forgotten what awaited her beyond that door. She now stood at bay with six opponents instead of one—six men, reckless and fuddled with wine.

They greeted her appearance with a roar of laughter.

"Lord! has she escaped you, Jack? Bravo, my charmer! you deserve a kiss for that," cried Viscount St John, reeling towards her.

"Gad! the hussy's lost me fifty crowns," muttered Lord Denver ruefully. "Gi' me a kiss to console me, my angel."

"Ay, a kiss all round," echoed the others.

Dorothy clenched her hands. "Gentlemen," she cried

desperately, "you forget yourselves. Permit me to pass."

"Not till you pay toll, madame," cried Lord Denver, standing before her mockingly.

"Ay, Dorothy, give us our duesh," echoed Sir Harry. "You're a good girl, Dorothy; won me fifty crowns to-night. I'll drink your health, my charmer," and falling on his knees he seized her hand, and waving his glass dramatically in the air burst forth in a shrill falsetto—

"Drink to me only with thine eyes,
And I will pledge with wine."

Dorothy turned haughtily on her tormentors.

"Let me go, sirs," she cried proudly; "how dare you keep me here?"

Some of the men drew back, but Lord Denver gave a low, mocking laugh.

"Who's for a game of 'Kiss in the ring'?" he cried, seizing Sir Harry's hand, and again he gave the Mohock's cry. At that sound Lord March hurried in from the adjoining room, but paused for a moment before he realised what was toward. With a wild laugh the men joined hands round the girl. Reeling from side to side they careered round her, drawing the ring ever closer, and singing mockingly a favourite pot-house song:—

"Where is the slave who would turn from a glass?
Where is the lad would ask leave of a lass?
Here's to the sport that Beelzebub blesses,
Here's to the wench who is free with caresses,
Taste of love's blisses,
Dames, widdies, and misses,
All can be won with a half-dozen kisses.
Yoicks, tally-ho!
Forward we go,
Excellent hunting in Petticoat Row."

Suddenly the door was flung open, and the Duke of Southwark appeared upon the threshold.

Lord March turned at the opening of the door, and at sudden sight of the Duke's face he stepped quickly forward, broke the ring, and pushed aside the mocking men, who

fell back in amazement, gazing from Lord March to Southwark, and half-sobered by surprise.

The Duke stood silent, gazing at Dorothy. At his entrance he had marked her standing defiantly at bay, with blazing eyes and hands fiercely clenched. But when she saw him a witness to her shame, suddenly her face grew white, her breast heaved, and she dropped her head low before his glance with a sudden, piteous sob.

Lord March stepped quickly towards the new-comer, but the Duke marked him not. He walked quietly across the room to the girl's side, and bowed low before her with stately courtesy.

"Madame," he said, and his voice rang proudly through the room,—*"madame, will you do me the honour to become my wife?"*

There was a sudden silence. She lifted her eyes to his with one long glance of tenderness and forgiveness, and she whispered softly—so softly that none save he could catch the words—*"Ah! but indeed I love you."*

A deep joy glowed in his eyes. Standing beside her, he turned and faced the astonished men, his right hand laid upon his sword-hilt.

"Gentlemen," he said quietly, *"Miss Lascelles awaits your apologies."*

CHAPTER V.

THE WOOLING OF LORD WILDMORE.

I.

ONCE again did the intrepid Lady Betty Acton summon to her drawing-room a famous assemblage of her sex. But, whereas beforetime the fair Amazons were inspired by Diana, the goddess of chastity, to fortress their hearts against attack, at this latter meeting they followed Diana in her second aspect, as goddess of the chase, and weaponed themselves with the bow of the huntress.

Betty piped to the hunt in the following manner:—

"I met that wretch, Peter Wildmore, in the Mall yesterday morning, and commended the Fates that he had lost so many of his notorious wagers. But was he one whit abashed? By my petticoat, no! 'Pon my soul, Lady Betty,' says he, as perky as a gamecock, 'I have lost fewer than I counted upon. Your sex amazes me, such resolution have its members displayed in withholding their favours till the last possible moment, and so prolonging the sport. I'm half of a mind to turn the chase in t'other direction, it being a leap-year, and wager ten gallants they'll not avoid *accepting of* favours for three short weeks. I should count my money safe.'"

She paused for breath. Loud murmurs of anger rose from the assembled Fair. The lovely Sybilla Seaton, Miss Arabella Fermor, the hard-hearted Belle Steward (those only of the assembled circle who had successfully withstood the challenge) were especially loud in their indignation.

"La! the wretch!" cried Belle Steward, with a laugh of exasperation, "a fig for him and his wagers! Cannot we set the chase ourselves?"

"The vanity of man!" cooed Miss Arabella Fermor. "Seeing one or two of us take pity on the creatures they must needs all deem themselves conquerors."

"Not conquerors," objected Miss Pamela Plunkett thoughtfully; "there's some matter of commendation in a conqueror, but——"

She was interrupted by a merry burst of laughter.

"Lud! Pam, you ought to know," laughed Lady Betty. "Does Mr Fytch wear the laurel wreath becomingly?"

Pamela blushed good-humouredly.

"At least," she argued, "Patrick takes some trouble with his wooing. Unlike some who deem it enough to throw the glove and—watch the scramble."

"Or others, who fondly deem the glove is schemed for, or ever it be drawn off the hand," added Belle Steward, with more asperity than usual.

"Well, Betty," urged Myra Esdaile, "it's not to be doubted you have some scheme of revenge. What is it to be?"

Betty rose slowly, and walking across the room, came to pause before a small statue of Diana. She looked solemnly up at the marble goddess, then turned a mischievous face to her companions.

"It's not to be doubted but that you are all well-read in the classics," she said, "but we know how vastly every mythos varies. Listen, then, while I expound to you the fable of the fair Diana."

A smile went round the expectant throng. When Betty took to fable-forming much sport was toward.

"Diana of Delos," began Betty, with true dramatic fervour, "was a fair and gentle maiden. Moreover, she was blessed with the gift of wisdom, and like other wise women she knew that, according to the law of man, her destiny was either to lead the chase, or—to follow it. Being of a modest disposition she naturally at first chose the former, leading the baying pack many a merry run, and from kindness of heart, or for better encouragement

of their prowess, suffering herself occasionally—to be caught. But presently, following the course of nature, men became discontented. Some complained that she gave them too much trouble,—they would not bestir themselves to catch her; some, on the other hand, declared that she did not run fast enough, that pursuit had lost its sport; others, that when caught she could not be held; and yet others, that she was too frequently caught, her flight but a pretence. So they professed to scorn her. What then remained for the fair and wise Diana to do? What save to reverse the order of things, no longer to lead, but to follow the chase? Wisely, then, she took up the bow of the huntress, cunningly she stocked her quiver, pitilessly she unleashed her hounds; no longer pursued, but pursuer; no longer scorned, but feared, she lived blithe of heart and merry of mood, and taught her whilom hunters the monstrous difference betwixt the outlooks of hare and hounds. That," concluded Betty, returning to her seat,—“that is the fable of Diana of Delos; let her who will interpret the same.”

The assembled Fair laughed applause, but eyed one another doubtfully. They wondered whether fair Diana of Delos ever became impervious to the arrows of her own sex.

Betty tapped her foot impatiently on the floor.

“Come, come,” she cried, “men complained that Diana did not run fast enough; she wisely showed them her pace—in pursuit. For myself, I’ve a mind for once to see the hound turn hare,—who’ll join me in a leap-year frolic?”

Pamela Plunkett threw back her head and laughed. “I string my bow, Betty,” she cried gaily.

“Malicious tongues whisper you’ve done it already, Pam, and brought down your first victim,” answered Betty mischievously. She loved to triumph over this conquered Amazon.

Pamela was too happy to resent the innuendo.

“Alack!” she laughed, “the victim proves a very Achilles, and subdues poor Penthesilea wholly.”

“But heaven have mercy, madame,” interrupted Miss

Steward impatiently, "whom shall we hunt?" She herself had no mind to pursue Sir Thomas Harding (that devoted worshipper!) down the labyrinths of Cupid's glades.

"We must all follow the same scent," cried Betty excitedly. "Come, shall I play the Diana and unleash all our sex on the trail?" She pulled round her chair, and, seating herself on the arm of it side-saddle wise, rocked it to and fro. "View-halloo!" she cried gaily, "Peter Wildmore stole away! Yoicks! Tally-ho!"

"Silence, you madcap!" laughed Myra, seizing her by the shoulders. "Betty, what is it you propose?"

Betty became on the instant solemn as a judge.

"Sure, Myra," she said, "didn't Peter marry me off to Charles without a with-your-leave or by-your-leave? Isn't he marrying off Pam here, and Miss Lascelles, and—and who can tell how many more?" she added, eyeing the assembled Fair suspiciously. "While he goes free who can account themselves safe? He will marry the whole town before he has done with it. Should not some one then (out of gratitude) perform the same office for him?"

"I'm not denying, madame," agreed Miss Steward, "there would be rare sport in such a chase. But supposing we pursue, and supposing we catch, what then? I'm of no mind to marry Lord Wildmore."

Betty shrugged her shoulders at this trivial objection.

"Lud! my dear, there's no necessity to go to extremes. The wretch has made you play for his benefit for the last three weeks; it is his turn now for a gambol. I confess I have threatened to wed him to a shrew; but I'm willing to forego the pleasure. Only it is a monstrous shameful thing such a lusty bachelor should go free, when so many a poor luckless spinster is forced into matrimony."

Betty's mischief was infectious.

"I am with you, madame," cried Miss Steward and the fair Arabella Fermor.

"And I, too," cried Clarissa Winston, with the complacent smile of one who forebodes a victory.

"To be sure it is leap year," said Cecilia thoughtfully.

"We must all run together," urged Betty earnestly. "There's proved safety in numbers. Surely, Pam, you'll never desert me; Mr Fytch is no man to misunderstand a frolic. Peggy, my child, you are a free woman. Miss Lascelles—Myra——? you can whisper the truth to his Grace and Sir Antony if you go surety they'll never play the traitor."

"We'll follow you, Betty," cried the conspirators gaily.

"It's understood, then, we start the chase, and force Peter Wildmore either to lose his heart or proffer his hand before three weeks be passed. Think what the wretch has dared to say concerning our sex—'Why women first wore——' How go the lines?"

"Why women first wore petticoats? The gentle sex declare 'Twas man's decree, to aid his chase, and hold the fleeting fair; But man knew well, small need was here from flight their limbs to fetter:

His prudence urged: 'Lest they pursue, to hamper them 'twere better,'"

quoted Pamela. "You are right, Betty; the writer of that deserves to be taught what an upside down o' the world it would be if women really pursued as he vows they do."

"To the chase, then," cried Betty again. "I warrant the hare will give us 'a good run for our money,' as Tom Harding puts it. But I'll wager my new silk petticoat we'll all dance at Peter's wedding ere ever the year is out."

"How do you purpose to begin?" asked Pamela.

"Lud! by scaring the wretch heartily. Oh! we have the properest frolic toward; listen what I propose."

The fair conspirators crowded round her, while in a tone of deepest mystery, punctuated by delicious little ripples of laughter, Betty unfolded her plans.

So these fair Amazons planned revenge. So the worms turned! (if such an appellation can be applied to these dainty conspirators.) So Diana called up the pack and set the chase on one poor bachelor.

When her visitors had departed Lord Charles Acton ventured cautiously into his wife's drawing-room. He

found her standing meditatively before the statue of Diana, gazing solemnly up into the blank eyes of the goddess. Softly he went behind her and slipped his arm round her waist. "What mischief are you plotting now, madame?" he asked, with mock severity.

Betty leaned her head back on his shoulder.

"Charles," she asked thoughtfully, "do you suppose the quarry ever enjoys the chase?"

"Oh! I should think he does. He has the fun of the run, just as we have; he leads the hounds a pretty dance and if he escapes—by Jove! what a tale he must make of it."

Betty laughed. "You dear stupid!" she murmured irrelevantly. "But if he be caught, Charles?"

Lord Charles shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh! Renard takes his luck like any other gentleman."

Betty sighed. "I'm very fond of Peter Wildmore, Charles," she said argumentatively.

"Well, so you should be. Old Peter's a rare fellow."

Betty shook her head and looked at the statue.

"But I think—" she added thoughtfully, "Diana was a wise woman, and had monstrous entertaining sport."

Charles never attempted to follow the intricacies of his wife's thoughts; he had long given up hope of tracing any connection between her remarks. He threw a critical eye over the marble goddess.

"Hum! pretty creature; but big feet," he adjudged.

Betty looked up mischievously and laughed.

"Thank the Fates, Charles, dear, you've married a clever wife."

Lord Charles shook his head. "It would appear too ironical madame," he answered, and proceeded to take his revenge.

"There, there! Charles, that's enough! You are ruffling my hair."

II.

The following day Lord Wildmore received a summons to wait upon Lady Betty Acton.

Lord Wildmore was a bachelor in more than name; save as amusing subjects for study the fairer sex had small attraction for him. He regarded Women as a whole with awe and dread, like the majority of his kind believing them to be half angel and half bird of prey.

But he looked upon Lady Betty Acton as an exception to the general rule, and entertained a great regard for her ladyship,—a regard due as much to the fact that she had married his best friend as to her jest-loving nature and saucy tongue. Accordingly he obeyed her summons promptly, foreboding no evil, and rode to her house with a twinkle in his eye, anticipating sport.

Lady Betty received her guest with unwonted gravity, and plunged into the gossip of the hour with an unusual air of abstraction. Lord Wildmore was not experienced in the ways of women, but he knew enough of the sex to understand that a woman, both in correspondence and conversation, will always reserve her most important communication for the postscript. Accordingly, after chatting upon general subjects for half-an-hour, he rose to take his leave, knowing that the surest way to bring her ladyship to the point.

Lady Betty looked up quickly. "One moment, my Lord Wildmore," she said eagerly.

He resumed his seat. Betty eyed him solemnly.

"Lord Wildmore, I am your friend," she said gravely.

"I were the most miserable man alive, madame, did I doubt that fact," he assured her readily.

"A friend, Lord Wildmore, may speak to a man for his good."

Peter Wildmore started. There are friends—and friends.

"Have I offended your ladyship?" he asked.

Betty shook her head.

"I saw your aunt, Lady Hannah Wildmore, last week. She was in much distress, having heard many disquieting rumours concerning you of late. She fears you are a sad rake, Lord Wildmore."

Peter looked up with an indignant denial; but Betty silenced him with a gesture.

"Oh, do not trouble to justify yourself to me," she

said quickly. "I know you well enough to be assured such reports have no foundation. But—the world holds many scandalmongers—and—I greatly fear Lady Hannah has heard much to your disadvantage."

Lord Wildmore grimaced. He had most pleasant expectations from the virtuous and venerable dame in question, and knew well that innocence profits a man little in face of an evil reputation.

He commented beneath his breath upon the character of scandalmongers.

"This is unfortunate, madame," he said; "what can I do to allay my revered aunt's—er—distress?"

"Oh! that is an easy matter," said Betty briskly. "You must marry."

Peter started back in horror: "Marry! Good heavens! Whom?"

"Any pleasant, well-brought-up girl of good family; or, better still, a widow. I will make it my business to give you every opportunity of becoming well acquainted with some suitable lady, and you must bring the matter to a head as soon as possible."

"But—good heavens, Lady Betty! I—I—don't wish to marry. I—I—object to it—er—on principle."

Betty eyed him coldly. "It is an absolute necessity if you would regain Lady Hannah's esteem," she argued.

He bowed to her opinion, but shook his head at her advice.

"I—I won't marry" he said stubbornly. "I was born to die a bachelor, I'll take my risks."

Betty's whole attitude expressed rigid disapproval.

"It is the only course open to you. Why should you object to marrying some pleasant girl?"

He took refuge in gallantry. "Ah! Lady Betty, you to ask me that."

Betty was for a moment disarmed and silenced.

Peter rose to take his leave.

"No," he said resolutely, "if I can only retain my character by marriage, egad! I'll be hanged with my bad name."

"You are monstrous prejudiced," answered Betty reprov-

ingly. "You come to me for help, and here I give you the best advice in the world, and you won't take it. Apart from all else, Lord Wildmore, it is clearly your duty to marry. No man of your position should remain a bachelor. It is monstrous selfish of you."

"I doubt whether my heir-at-law would share your view of the matter, madame," answered Peter drily.

Betty shrugged her shoulders.

"There are other people to be considered besides Mr Cave," she said sharply.

"Egad! madame, I cannot see that my bachelor estate concerns any but myself," he said testily.

"Some men are blind because they *will* not see," answered Betty solemnly.

"May I entreat your meaning, madame?"

Betty hesitated. "I cannot betray the secrets of my sex," she said demurely; "but—a woman's heart is lightly won. A man who is resolved upon celibacy should at least be more circumspect in his conduct towards the opposite sex."

Peter gazed at her ladyship in horror.

"Good heavens, Lady Betty!" he cried aghast, "do you mean to imply that—er—has some—er—have I the honour to be favoured by—er—— What *do* you mean, madame?"

Betty shook her head sadly.

"I cannot betray confidences, Lord Wildmore," she said demurely. "I would only advise you to pay more thought to the affections of—er—those with whom you come in contact, else may you unwittingly cause much distress! Lady Esdaile and I have both noted this affair, and we both hope it may be a match."

Peter set his mouth obstinately.

"I am—er—grateful to your ladyships for your—er—kindly interest in my affairs," he said grimly. "I regret I cannot profit by your—er—advice."

Betty sighed. "I cannot but take an interest in your career," she said. "I hope you will soon see the wisdom of my advice and repent your foolish decision. I shall certainly do all in my power to assist you to a wife."

Peter stifled a groan. "I—I trust not, madame. On

my honour, Lady Betty," he urged desperately, "I would entreat you to—er—leave me in peace. I—I unhesitatingly refuse to marry any one."

Betty shook her head. "I am your true friend," she said with becoming solemnity, "and all your friends would doubtless do their utmost to promote your marriage."

"Preserve us!" cried Peter, for he was a man of many friends.

When Lord Wildmore had taken his leave Betty sat some minutes lost in thought. Then she rose, and walking to the statue of Diana surveyed it somewhat distastefully.

"I must lead the chase while it lasts," she resolved; "but—I rather hope—Peter will never marry."

Lord Wildmore rode from Lady Betty's house with heavy foreboding. He knew well the resolution of the lady from whom he had just parted; knew well that when she fixed her mind upon a matter she invariably pursued her chosen path, heedless of all entreaties to desist. He saw his precious liberty threatened. The feminine world loomed menacing before him—an ambuscade of women all ready for the pounce. His dread of the sex increased; it seemed to him that every woman was bent on his destruction. Every fair face he encountered was full of menace to his peace; every word, every glance was dark with a hidden significance. He saw himself in vision seized and married willy-nilly. How could any poor bachelor hope to resist the resolute phalanxes of these fair matchmakers?

Early the following morning, before Fashion was abroad Lord Wildmore ventured forth for his customary ride in the Row. Scarcely had he been there ten minutes when Lady Betty, accompanied by Miss Arabella Fermor, appeared and joined his company. He expressed amazement at their early rising; but Miss Fermor assured him, with many a rapturous expression, that she adored nothing so much as an early morning ride. Betty threw him a meaning glance at this similarity in their tastes, and then, cantering forward, affected an absorbing interest in the tops of the trees, or the distant stretches of the Park, leaving him to the enjoyment of the artless smiles and glances of Miss Fermor.

This cunning wile did not pass unobserved by the cautious bachelor: never did words say more clearly than Betty's glance, "Here, weak man, is your opportunity." He was helpless indeed; his gallantry forbade him to desert the lady, yet he saw in her Lady Betty's chosen instrument for his destruction.

So they rode. Peter was glum, but Miss Fermor was alarmingly chatty, not to say confidential. In five minutes her gauntlet became unfastened, and he must refasten it. Next her stirrup needed readjustment—involving the display of a very pretty foot. Thirdly, her curls became mysteriously entangled in the clasp of her feather, and her cavalier must rescue her again. And through all she smiled and chattered, quite undisturbed by his reluctant answers.

Peter grew more and more terrified. He glanced pleadingly at Lady Betty; but her studied abstraction showed clearly that no help was there. He turned again to Miss Fermor. She looked away with the confused haste of one caught in an ardent glance, and sighed.

"Do you often ride here o' mornings?" she asked naively.

"Oh, no! no!" said Peter hastily. "It is—er—quite by chance I am here to-day."

The lady smiled as one who would say, "Oh! lucky chance."

"A chance that is most unlikely to occur again. *Most unlikely*," stammered Peter earnestly. He valued his morning ride.

"I shall ride here every morning henceforth," said Miss Fermor, with a tender glance, "here—or elsewhere."

Peter saw his morning rides at an end.

The gentle Arabella's horse shied. For a second she steadied herself by his arm.

"I know I am monstrous troublesome," she began pathetically, "but——"

But he could endure no more; his nerve deserted him. He threw chivalry to the winds. With a muttered apology he turned his horse's head and incontinently fled.

At his rooms he found awaiting him a dozen scented notes, pressing invitations to water-parties down to

Hampton, to supper-parties at "The Mitre," riding-parties out to the country, or frolics to Vauxhall; and each invitation ended with the alarming information that a certain fair pinster, or attractive widow, had promised to be of the party. Peter felt the toils closing round him; clearly he saw the dread huntress on his track.

At noon he ventured out into the Mall, and thence into the Green Park. Almost immediately, with a promptness that suggested an ambuscade, he encountered Lady Esdaile, accompanied by Miss Darblay.

"Oh! Lord Wildmore," cried the former eagerly. "What good fortune! I have an appointment with Lady Betty Acton in ten minutes. Be so gallant as to escort Miss Darblay to her chair." With a meaning look, clearly warning him of his opportunity, she hastened away, leaving the distracted Peter gazing helplessly into the languishing eyes of the gentle Cecilia.

With unbecoming haste he led the way towards the throng of chairmen at the entrance to the Park.

"Stay! stay! Lord Wildmore," cried Cecilia. "My—my—er—my shoe has come untied."

Reluctantly Peter followed her to a seat beneath the trees. There, after a certain coy hesitation, the lady displayed a pretty foot, but discovered to her amazement that her shoe-ties were intact.

"I could have sworn it was loose," said she. "Heigh ho! How pleasant it is to sit in this shade. I am of no mind to return home yet. If we wait, I'll wager some of our acquaintances will pass. And it is so vastly amusing quizzing the folk. I warrant you a sad quiz, my lord. The lines of your mouth testify it."

Peter's mouth drooped dolefully, as he denied the accusation.

"Oh, lud! you men think we women know nothing of you; but I'm a monstrous clever reader of faces. Now, what would you say of my character, or my destiny, from my face?" She leaned forward and put her pretty face very near to him, looking up at him from under her long lashes.

Peter started back. "I—I can't say, madame."

Cecilia eyed him reproachfully. "How cruel you are, Lord Wildmore. Is the character then so bad?"

"No, no—on no account, madame," stammered Peter.

"I believe it is so," continued Cecilia. "I'll be sworn you read something ill-fated in my features. Lud! my lord, you have quite upset me. Do tell me what you see."

She laid her hand pleadingly on his arm.

"Nothing—nothing, madame," he answered impatiently.

"Now I am certain there is something untoward," she cried. "You are so angry—so impatient. Alas! what an ill-fated creature I am. Yet why be angry with me for what I cannot mend?"

She drew out her handkerchief and gently dabbed her eye. Peter had never yet looked unmoved on woman's tears; he gave himself up for lost.

Salvation came from an unexpected quarter. Walking down the centre of the shady path came Mr Soames. At sudden sight of him Cecilia flushed and sprang to her feet.

Soames stopped and smiled a cheery greeting.

"Good morrow, enchantress," he cried gaily.

"Good morrow, flatterer," she cried in the same light tones; but her eyes eagerly scanned his face for some reflection of the pleasure this meeting awoke in her heart. For, alas! Mr Soames, though he himself knew it not, had won more than his wager from Cecilia Darblay.

Peter looked quickly from one to the other; he breathed again.

"I have an engagement to—to wait on my Lord Oxford," he stammered. "I will reluctantly relinquish Miss Darblay to your escort, Soames." Without waiting for an answer he fled from the Park.

In the Mall he encountered Miss Steward. She greeted him with flushed cheek and adoring glance, most unwonted signs of emotion in this hard-hearted damsel. He stopped and eyed her aghast. Many pleasantries had passed between them in the past; was it, perchance, she of whom Lady Betty had spoken when she hinted at one whose affections he had unwittingly won? He deemed it wisest to press on to safety with no more than a distant salutation.

More convinced than ever that all the world of women sought his capture, Lord Wildmore resolved to avoid female society for a while, trusting that the weathercock minds of his pursuers would soon be turned away to a less hopeless chase. So he resolved; but what worth is Man's resolution when Diana pursues?

At the entrance to Pall Mall Lady Sybilla Seaton hailed him; he turned a deaf ear to her call and hurried on. She sent her footman in pursuit. Desperately Peter out-paced him. Half-way up the street he saw Lady Betty and Miss Fermor approaching. Across the road stood Clarissa Winston's coach. There appeared no hope of escape.

In desperation he darted into a goldsmith's shop. At the counter sat Miss Plunkett and Margaret Beauchamp examining some rings. They looked up at his entrance.

"Lud! Lord Wildmore," cried Pamela, "the very man for whom we were wishing! You've such a rare taste in jewels; do give us your aid in selection."

"A thousand pardons, madame," stammered Peter, "but I—I have a most pressing engagement with—er—with my Lord Oxford." With violent haste he brushed aside the obsequious shopman and strode out at the door, leaving amazement behind him.

Ten yards up the street stood Lady Betty and Miss Fermor; ten yards down the street was Lady Seaton's perspiring footman; but before him stood a hackney coach. He sprang in.

"Drive like the devil!" he shouted to the astonished coachman.

"Where?" asked the man in amaze.

"What the plague does that matter to you?" cried Peter, with renewed impatience at the man's unwarrantable curiosity. Then, recollecting himself, he mumbled, "Go to—oh! to White's coffee-house"

Providence is kind. The scent may be hot and the chase untiring; but the fox has still his earth, and man his club.

White's rooms were almost deserted at that hour of the day. They looked dismal enough in the glare of the

bright sunshine, but to Peter Wildmore they represented a haven of salvation.

A tankard of ale helped to steady his nerves; he took the most comfortable chair and sat down to the perusal of the day's 'News Letter.' An hour passed peacefully. His fears were calmed. He perceived that he had been unnecessarily nervous, and had imagined danger where no danger was. With a sudden renewal of courage he left the safety of the coffee-house, and walked back to his rooms in Jermyn Street.

But there his servant greeted him with the information that Lady Betty Acton, Lady Winston, and a third lady—name unknown—had called during his absence. Peter was staggered; his fears returned.

"If they come again, James, I—I'm not at home."

"Very good, my lord. And if they wish to wait your return?"

This possibility so horrified Peter that he waited but to change his coat, and then went out to a solitary dinner at Almack's, meditating sadly on his homeless condition.

About four o'clock he ventured to White's, and engaged in a game of picquet with Sir Harry Ford. Good luck attended him—his spirits rose.

Presently one of the servants interrupted his game: Lady Winston was below in her coach, and wished to speak with him.

Lord Wildmore glanced helplessly at his companion's laughing face.

"By the Lord Harry! Peter, you're a dashing blade," cried that lusty wooer, with twinkling eyes; "go down and soothe the pursuing Fair."

Seeing no help for it, Peter descended to learn her ladyship's desires, while Sir Harry filled his glass and drank to the health of "Peter Cupid!"

Lady Winston sat below in her coach. She pushed open the door invitingly on Peter's approach. He saw Miss Steward's curly head turned aside, gazing from the opposite window.

"Good evening, Lord Wildmore," cried Lady Winston gaily; "do be an angel and take pity on Miss Steward and

me. We are dying to go and see the 'White Witch of Powell Street,'—but—we've no courage to go without an escort. Will you go with us?"

"Madame, I should be enchanted," stammered Peter, aghast, "but, alas——!"

"Lud! my lord, you can't be so cruel as to refuse?" interrupted Clarissa Winston; "it won't keep you above an hour. They say she is a marvel, and can read the true future of every creature. She has already prophesied your marriage, and——"

"My ma—marriage!" cried Peter, aghast.

"Yes, to a well-known lady of the town. A dark beauty they say," answered the little widow, shaking out her dark curls with a self-conscious simper. "But come and hear for yourself—it is monstrous entertaining. Ah, do."

She lifted her eyes and favoured him with a most enticing smile, but Peter was horror-struck. Even his gallantry could not face such an ordeal. His excuses were elaborate, if somewhat confused, and the disappointed Fair were obliged to turn elsewhere for an escort.

Peter, safely back in the coffee-house, sank into his accustomed corner with a melancholy sigh. Even the powers of darkness, it seemed, were bent on fettering him with a wedding ring. He saw small chance of escape. When woman and witchcraft combine, who can hope to withstand them?

He sighed with relief as he looked round the room; at least here was peace. No female foot ever entered the sacred precincts of the Gamecock Club at White's. He called for wine, and rallied his sinking spirits.

Presently Lord Charles Acton and Patrick Fytch lounged into the room, and sat down at a neighbouring table, where they were joined by Sir Harry Ford.

"Deuced good notion of Sir Jacob's," said Lord Charles casually, "to have a ladies' evening here once a-week."

Peter turned quickly in his chair.

"Sure, an excellent suggestion!" said Patrick, with laughing eyes, "but it should go further. For my part, I would give them three evenings at least, and a morning or so into the bargain."

"By the Lord Harry! I agree with Soames. If you do

it at all you should do it entirely," interposed Sir Harry emphatically.

"What! you'd have the charmers here altogether?"

"That would I! Give them equal rights to the place. Let the club be a platonic institution for both sexes."

"What!" thundered Peter, springing to his feet.

"Ah! Is that you, Wildmore? Hasn't Soames spoken to you on the matter yet? He intends to propose it to-morrow."

"What—er—admit women here?" cried Peter again, in horrified tones.

"Sure, it's but a delicate attention due to the sex," said Patrick soothingly.

"But—but Soames will never carry it," stammered Peter.

"Oh! I hope so," said Sir Harry reprovingly. "It were hardly gallant to oppose the suggestion."

"Are you all mad?" thundered Peter desperately.

"What! the notion doesn't take you?" asked Sir Harry cheerfully. "Why, man, what cause have you to object? You've no wife."

"Not yet," muttered Peter vaguely—"not yet." He gazed round the peaceful room. Was even this haven to be denied him? Shaking his head despondently he left the club, heedless of the roar of laughter that followed his departure.

Peter walked sadly back to his quarters in Jermyn Street. He mounted to his room and gazed round the snug apartment. Oh how many rare bachelor parties did it not remind him? His eyes fell on the pile of invitations lying on the bureau; he groaned aloud.

He sat down to consider the situation. Clearly London could no longer offer him any haven of refuge from the pursuing Fair; of the fact of the pursuit he was convinced. He knew well his weakness, his utter helplessness in face of a pleading look or quivering lip; against such weapons he could offer no resistance. Moreover, should the pursuit draw yet closer, should some tender heart be involved, chivalry itself might demand surrender. Two alternatives suggested themselves to his troubled brain, seeing he could not obviously spend all his days lurking in unfrequented

taverns: either he must face the danger boldly and reconcile himself to possible capture—or he must fly. Long he pondered which course to adopt.

At length his glance rested on a pack of cards, and the indecision cleared from his face.

"Egad! I'll leave it to the Fates to decide!" he cried, springing to his feet. "Cut for fight or flight. Black, I stay; red, I fly. Here's for my future."

He stretched out his hand eagerly and cut the cards. He turned up—the Queen of Hearts.

For some moments he stood looking at the smiling face of her Majesty; then muttering, "Dence take it! the women are everywhere," he went to the door and shouted for his servant.

"I am going down to Moorstone Abbey at once. Pack my mails and order the horses. We start as soon as it is light."

"To Moorstone—now—my lord?" stammered the astonished servant.

"Damme! yes, now! I—I want to fish."

James gazed from his master's wild countenance to the card-bestrewn floor.

"Very good, my lord," he murmured despondently, and left the room, a man of sighs and head-shakings.

So Peter Wildmore fled from town in fear of matrimony. But when Lady Betty Acton heard thereof she laughed and clapped her hands. "For," quoth she, "Dan Cupid reigns in the country, and in the country—there are no clubs."

III.

Peter Wildmore lay on his back on the grassy bank of the river meditating blissfully upon the peace and beauty of the country. Beside him lay his rod and a well-filled creel of trout, betokening a good morning's sport. The river rippled merrily at his feet, the sweet meadow-grass waved around him, the buttercups and sorrel glowing like burnished brass. Above him the sky lay blue and still, but in the east the white clouds were crowding soft and

silver as angels' wings, shining in the sunshine like the hosts of Heaven. The air was heavy with delicious scents and alive with mysterious whisperings. Peter blinked lazily up at the clear heavens and felt at peace with all the world.

Suddenly the silence was broken by a splash. Peter sat up and looked about him.

As he glanced round the trunk of a pollard he saw on the opposite bank, a little higher up the river, a girl dabbling her hand in the water and tossing stones idly into the stream. She was in rustic dress, with short skirt and large sun-hat, but never yet did rustic maid wear such elegant shoes and stockings, or such a dainty belaced bodice. Peter Wildmore eyed her suspiciously from his hiding-place behind the willow, and his heart sank.

Presently she began to sing, a sad and tuneful ditty concerned with the betrayal of a fond heart and much weeping of the willow. She made a pretty picture, this dainty little lady, sitting by the river in the blazing sunshine merrily warbling the song of her broken heart. Truly a pretty picture had there been one present with heart to melt at sight thereof. But Peter Wildmore only eyed her with renewed suspicion and found no music in her song.

Suddenly she sprang to her feet and began to walk downstream towards him. Peter seized his rod and basket, meditating flight, but before he could turn away she spied him and hailed him blithely.

"Lud! Is that you, Lord Wildmore?" she cried. "Who would have thought of meeting you here? How monstrous pleasant."

Peter gazed at her tongue-tied. Under the shade of the wide sun-hat he saw the sunny curls and lovely face of that queen of coquettes, Miss Arabella Fernor.

"How monstrous pleasant to meet you," continued the lovely Arabella gaily. "Miss Darblay and I have come down to the country with Lady Esdaile. We are housed at the Horse and Crow, a mighty comfortable inn, down in the village yonder. We have a mind to turn rustic for a week or so after the staling of town. But I had no notion,

my lord, you were in Arcadia also. What a pleasant meeting!"

Peter murmured polite incoherences and groaned in spirit. Truly the pursuit must be indeed resolute to bring such modish ladies from the pleasures of St James's down to the dulness of a remote country village.

"Have you been angling?" pursued Arabella eagerly. "What have you caught?"

Peter was proud of his catch. He opened his basket and held out its contents for her view. The lady expressed admiration.

"How monstrous clever!" she cried. "I have never before seen fish fresh from the water. What lovely colours! How I wish I could see them nearer."

Peter looked gratefully at the stream which flowed between them.

"How far away is the nearest bridge?" asked Arabella.

"Oh, fully a mile down-stream," answered Peter easily.

The lady gave a little cry of consternation. "How vastly aggravating! Here have I been walking for miles, and now I must tramp yet another couple of miles or more before I can reach the village, whereas could I but cross here it were but ten minutes' walk. Is it not so, my lord?"

Peter could not deny it.

"Lud! how tired I am," sighed the lady. "What would I not give for fairy powers to waft me across the stream."

Peter looked embarrassed. "I—I am most distressed, madame," he stammered. "I wish——" he hesitated.

"Yes," said the lady eagerly. "You wish——?"

"I—er—wish the bridge were nearer," he finished lamely. Miss Fermor looked disappointed.

"Another mile!" she sighed. "Two miles belike. Lud! I shall never do it. And look," she added, pointing to the sky, "it will rain presently, thunder possibly; I cannot abide thunder. And I—here shall I be, alone in the storm. Perhaps I shall be lost. It is very like. Lost in the storm. Oh, Lord Wildmore, what shall I do?"

She pushed back her flapping sun-hat and lifted to him

a most distressful countenance. Peter stared at her helplessly.

"I—I do not think there will be thunder," he said weakly.

"I am vastly grateful for the assurance," answered the lady ironically. Then she sighed. "Oh, that I could ford the stream here! Is there really no means of crossing, Lord Wildmore? I am so tired."

"Really, madame, I—I——"

"Is the water very deep?" asked Arabella thoughtfully.

"Only in parts, madame."

"I would wade across, did I not fear the pools and currents," she said, as though to herself. Then her glance swept the distant horizon. "Oh, if only some one were here to carry me across!" she murmured sadly to the distant meadows.

Chivalry could resist no longer. Peter laid down his rod and waded across the stream.

"If I might—er—hope for the honour, madame," he said nervously, holding out his arms.

The lady started with surprise.

"What! Lord Wildmore, you would carry me across? How monstrous gallant! But I could not permit it. I could not dream of permitting it. To be sure it is nearly the dinner hour, and I am weary to death, but still—I could not——"

To save further parley Peter picked her up and waded back into the stream. Miss Fermor gave a little scream, and then nestled comfortably into his arms, resting her head against his shoulder and looking up at him with alluring gentleness from under her long golden-brown lashes.

Peter gazed stolidly at the opposite bank. Miss Fermor frowned.

Suddenly, in mid-stream, she gave a little cry and wriggled in his arms.

"Oh, lud!" she cried. "I feel so monstrous insecure. I entreat you do not let me fall."

With a quick movement she threw her arms about his neck and clung to him ardently.

Peter took three wild strides and plumped his burden down unceremoniously on the edge of the bank. But, alas! the treacherous bank gave way, the lady staggered, screamed, and clung to Peter. He clutched her desperately and lifted her into safety, but not before one dainty foot had been dipped in the water.

The gentle Arabella leaned heavily against her cavalier's arm, and for one awful moment he feared she was about to swoon. Such indeed was at first her intention, but recollecting with what rash vigour the male hand is wont to administer water to the swooning female, she prudently refrained, and contented herself with sinking gracefully down upon the bank and lifting sweetly reproachful eyes to her companion.

Peter poured forth a string of embarrassed apologies, but the gentle Arabella beamed forgiveness upon him.

"It is nothing," she said bravely. "I was only frightened. How my heart beats! I must sit and rest a moment here before I go down to the village."

Full of self-reproach for his clumsiness, Peter sat down on the stump of a willow, and looked down ruefully at his fair companion.

Arabella lifted her eyes to his, dropped them, and sighed. Peter looked hastily away.

Arabella pushed back her sun-hat, and raised her pretty face to the wide heavens. The golden curls, immortalised by Mr Pope, hung low over her bosom, her dainty feet were crossed, her white hand gleamed on the green moss. She was fully conscious that she made a lovely picture. But wherein lies the value of a lovely picture if no one will look thereon? Again she sighed. Her eyes wandered to the fishing-creel.

"What splendid fish!" she said admiringly. "Did you have much difficulty in landing them, Lord Wildmore?"

Peter turned to her with all the eagerness of the fisherman to tell his tale. Arabella listened with her soul in her eyes, as though Peter Wildmore's fishing was to her of sweetest moment. When his narrative waned, she carefully averted her eyes, that he might have full opportunity for studying her beauty unobserved.

"How I adore the country!" she said, turning up her eyes. "So peaceful, so quiet!"

"Very quiet," agreed Peter drily.

"Do not you too love it, my lord?" she asked gravely.

"Heartily, madame—for a week."

Arabella lifted puzzled brows.

"I could live here for ever," she sighed. "How I envy yonder happy milkmaids! To rise with the sun, to wander in the sweet meadows, to live bowered in roses and honeysuckle, to——"

"Milk the cows?" suggested Peter, with twinkling eyes.

The lady smiled. "To milk tame cows," she corrected.

"Cecilia and I are resolved while we are in the country to live in every particular the life of a rustic girl. You see we even wear the milkmaid's dress," she added complacently, surveying her short taffeta skirt.

"So I perceive," said Peter, with becoming gravity.

"Well, doubtless the life has its pleasures."

"The simple life," she murmured, smoothing the delicate lace ruffles on her slender wrists. "The simple life! Ah! how I long for it!" and she sighed for the simple life with all the rapture of one whom necessity had never obliged to lead it.

Peter's eyes twinkled. "I, too, madame, love the simple life—for a week."

Again her brows rose in puzzled surprise.

"But you can have no notion, Lord Wildmore," she said gravely, "how a woman wearies of the turmoil of town."

"And a man, too, at times, madame."

"Lad! you amaze me. I had dreamed that every man adored it. But I have noticed before how many preferences we share in common. We are birds of a feather."

Directly she had said the words she looked away in confusion and blushed very prettily. The lovely Arabella was by nature a trifle pale; none of her many charms was more highly prized by this gentle lady than her power of ready blushing.

Peter looked down at her thoughtfully. She was very fair to look upon. Moreover, she had forgiven him like an angel when he dropped her in the river; she had listened

to his fishing stories with breathless interest—and belief. **What man could remain ungrateful?**

She seemed very fair, very innocent, very unconventional, sitting on the grass and chattering of the joys of the country. One white hand was toying with the flowers at his feet. Its nearness gave him a pleasant thrill. Peter was perilously near the brink.

Dreamily the lady plucked a blade of grass and began to plait a ring, weaving it round her finger. Peter started at sight of the fatal symbol. He remembered his danger. He shuddered at thought of his unwariness. Abruptly he rose to his feet.

"Are you wise to linger, madame?" he asked. "I fear your words will prove true,—we are likely to have a storm."

Arabella started from her reverie and frowned. Then she followed his glance and noted the darkness of the eastern sky.

Her resolution wavered. She was not one to underrate the wonderful opportunities which lurk in the sheltering of a couple under one tree while a storm rages overhead. Since the days of Merlin, women have proved themselves ever alive to the possibilities of such a situation. But, on the other hand, pollard willows offer little hope of satisfactory shelter, and she had no mind to run the risk of rain-bedraggled garments and uncured locks. She chose the more prudent course, and springing to her feet turned to follow the path down to the village.

Peter, as in duty bound, offered his escort, but the lady resolutely refused his company. She had no mind to scare the quarry needlessly and lose, by too persistent attacks, the advantage she had already gained.

Miss Fermor had, indeed, the brain of a strategist.

IV.

Lord Wildmore sat down to dine that afternoon in much perturbation of spirit. The storm had broken; the wind howled, wild squalls of rain swept across the fair face of the meadows, black storm-piled clouds hung low in the

sky. But neither the raging of the wind nor the crashing branches of his immemorial beech trees were responsible for the shadow of anxiety that darkened Peter's eyes: those three fair ladies, seeking country peace and rest in the village below, were the sole disturbers of his peace. Again he felt the toils closing around him, again it seemed to him that all the world had combined to drive him into matrimony. Even in the remote recesses of his own village he could not count himself secure. The sweet sense of safety which had blessed him for the last three days had vanished.

He gazed dismally round at the pictures of his ancestors which lined the walls; it seemed to his heated fancy that even these painted faces glared at him reproachfully. "All married men!" he groaned, as he filled his glass. Opposite his seat hung the portrait of the great founder of his line; in the dim light Peter fancied the old soldier shook his head severely at this, the last of his house, with whom his name would die.

He shifted his place hastily, and turned to face a jovial admiral, the only bachelor the house had known. Peter winked furtively at the portrait of his merry uncle, the man of many loves, and drained his glass to his memory.

He was startled by a sudden violent peal at the bell and the sounds of unwonted disturbance below, the tones of strange voices, feet running hurriedly to and fro.

He looked up anxiously when the butler entered the room.

"My lord," puffed that solemn functionary breathlessly, "my Lady Betty Acton's coach has met with a mishap at the gates!"

Peter started. "Lady Betty Acton!" he cried in amaze. "Is her ladyship there?"

"Yes, my lord. It would seem she was journeying down to Guildford, but the horses have foundered. She sends a man to ask if you can give her lodging. There is no room at the inn."

Peter staggered to his feet. His fears revived. Was this another wile of that indefatigable matchmaker?

"Is her ladyship alone?" he asked anxiously.

"No, my lord; Lady Winston and Miss Steward are

journeying with her. Shall I send down a chair for the ladies?"

Peter needed no further proof to convince him of Betty's guile.

"Certainly, certainly," he cried wildly, "bring them in. Show them every attention. Let them remain as long as they wish. Bid them regard the house as their own. I—I leave it to you, Connell, to see they are well bestowed. As for me—I—I am going for a walk!"

"For a walk, my lord!" cried the servant in amazement.

"Yes, yes; tell her ladyship how much I regret that I cannot be here to—ive her. Tell her—I—I am going for a walk—er—on important business for—er—a few days."

As he spoke, Peter struggled into his coat, picked up his hat, and strode towards the garden door.

The servant hurried after him.

"My lord, my lord," he cried helplessly.

"See to the ladies," commanded Peter. "I—I shall be back in—er—a week. I must have a walk. See to the ladies."

He strode out into the storm and banged the door behind him, leaving Connell leaning helplessly against a suit of armour, shaking his head with bitter forebodings.

Peter strode on wildly, paying small heed to the direction of his steps. He soon left the park behind and began to ascend the high moorland above the village. Here he met the full force of the storm. Fierce squalls of rain swept with the hiss of serpents across the bare face of the downs. The thunder growled and rumbled overhead, the voices of the storm fiends shrieked and moaned through the wind. The whole air was full of clamour.

For half-an-hour he strode along the lonely moorland track, battling with the fierce onslaughts of the wind.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the storm ceased. The rain stopped, the wind died down, the thunder moaned and muttered away into the distance. Along the western horizon the clouds parted in a golden rift, and low shafts of light swept across the dark sky, veiling the rain-soaked world in a blue and golden haze. Silence succeeded sound. Where all had been clamour and turmoil, now the soft drip,

drip, from the trees, the dying whispers of the wind, and anon the distant call of a sheep, that "voice of solitude," alone broke the utter stillness of the place.

With the flight of the storm Peter came to a sudden pause and turned to survey his surroundings. He had wandered far. All around him the downs heaved their round backs towards the lowering heavens, an empty landscape, broken here and there by a few scanty copses of undergrown trees. Immediately above him the track he followed turned abruptly to the right and disappeared behind a shoulder of the ascent. Far below, he could dimly descry the thatched roofs of the village; and a little to the left of these, bowered in beeches, rose the tall chimneys of the Abbey.

The sight of the smoke of his ancestral chimneys recalled Peter promptly to the unpleasantness of his situation. It seemed to him a most pitiful thing that a lusty bachelor should be driven from the peaceful security of his own fireside to pass the night on a bleak, storm-swept moor, where no shelter offered from the still threatening canopy of the heavens. Having once had rash recourse to flight he could not well return home until his visitors had departed, therefore it appeared imperatively necessary that he should speedily seek another shelter for his outcast head.

He sat down on a large boulder at the side of the track, and meditatively drew out his clay and tobacco, hoping that trusty adviser might help him to a decision. But here again he was doomed to disappointment—he had no tinder-box.

"A plague take all women!" he cried aloud angrily.

His words were echoed by a woman's voice crying for help.

The sounds came from a little higher up the track, where it curved out of sight, a hundred yards above the place where he sat.

Peter sprang to his feet and stood spellbound. Was this another of the machination of the Guileful Female? Could not even a rain-swept moor offer him security?

"Help! help!" re-echoed the voice. Even in the turmoil of his surprise and horror Peter noted with admiration the beauty of the voice. But he also noted, with

renewed suspicion, that there was no fear in the cry; clearly the woman was not in danger. His wonder and his doubts increased.

"Are you there? Are you coming?" cried the voice again, this time with a note of indignation. "Help! help!"

Steps sounded above, descending the track. Peter hesitated no longer. He saw himself entrapped. He turned and began to stride rapidly in the opposite direction, hoping to be out of sight before his pursuer turned the corner.

The cries continued, the footsteps drew nearer: Peter began incontinently to run, diligently feigning deafness.

An exclamation of amazement broke from the lips of the pursuing Fair, then she too winged her pace to overtake him.

Peter ran! The loose stones of the track rolled under his feet, the shale and pebbles flew, his pursuer was fleet of foot, she gained on him.

Peter ran, hot and anxious he paced it, fear of the designing female gripped his heart; he heard her steps close behind him, her cries had ceased, she kept her breath for pursuit.

Peter ran! A stone tripped his unwary feet, he fell prone, his pursuer stood over him, silently surveying his prostrate form.

Reluctantly the fallen one struggled to his knees and looked up at the face of his captor. She stood silent, looking down on him with such an expression of scorn and contempt that all his fears vanished, and a great wave of crimson swept across his face.

At last she spoke. "I did not believe," she said slowly, "the earth held such a coward!"

Peter scrambled indignantly to his feet and began to stammer an explanation.

"I—I heard you cry for help, madame, and——"

"You deemed it wiser to run while there was yet time," interrupted the girl scornfully. "I commend your prudence, sir. I might have been in danger, which you must have shared had you come to my help. Ah!" she

added, with sudden passion, "that such a coward should live."

Peter felt aggrieved, but hardly saw his way to a satisfactory explanation of his conduct. "You are entirely mistaken, madame," he said crossly; "but—it's of no consequence. Will you accept my help now?"

The girl gazed round the desolate scene.

"Needs must!" she said ungraciously. "Here is no one else to turn to. And I cannot leave the pony and goods alone. Come, then, and help me—if you are not afraid," she added scornfully.

Peter received the suggestion in indignant silence and followed her up the track.

A few yards round the corner they came upon the scene of the disaster. In the centre of the road stood a cart, forlornly tip-tilted, one wheel reposing in the ditch near by with an air of aggressive independence. In the shafts stood a remorseful pony, sniffing at a basket of vegetables which lay at his feet. Bags and bundles were strewn round in melancholy profusion, and the side of the ditch was dusted with flour from a sack which had met with an untimely end.

The girl surveyed the ruin with a sigh of resignation.

"The pony was frightened at the storm," she explained briefly. "I will lead him, if you will help me to carry the bundles; the cart must wait till to-morrow."

Deftly she unharnessed the pony and then proceeded to load her companion with the results of her marketing.

He took his burdens meekly. A sack of flour, a large bag of fruit, a couple of fat ducks, and various minor encumbrances, were poised in his arms. The girl herself carried the shattered remains of a basket of eggs and led the pony.

So, side by side, they set out.

Peter peered furtively over his bundles at his companion. She walked on with a quick, easy step, leading her pony and gazing straight before her, her chin raised high, with a scornful curve of her upper lip that piqued Peter excessively.

The little man sighed behind his bundles. His arms

ached, the bag of vegetables bumped his knees as he walked, the packets under his arms slipped alarmingly, and he had no spare hand with which to push them into place; he could but press his elbows closer to his side, like a trussed fowl, and stagger onwards. He began to conceive an intense dislike to this damsel, who burdened him like an ass and yet would not deign to exchange a word with him.

"Is it much farther?" he asked sharply.

The girl turned and stared at him coldly.

"Are you tired?" she asked scornfully.

"Yes—I am," he answered bluntly, shifting the sack of flour higher up his arm.

"Then I suppose we must stop and rest," she said aggrievedly, suiting the action to the word.

Peter put down his bundles with alacrity, and tried to stretch his arms. To his horror he found the parcel under his left arm still remained there, clinging to his sleeve. With fearful foreboding he plucked it off, and gazed remorsefully upon its greasy elongated shape. The girl followed his gaze and gave a little cry of distress.

"That was the butter!" she gasped. "What have you done to it?"

For a moment Peter gazed upon the wreck with horror, then he threw back his head and laughed heartily. To his surprise a musical ripple of laughter echoed him; he met the girl's twinkling eyes and laughed again. Their laughter danced away across the downs and died into silence.

"'Pon my soul! I'm very sorry," said Peter, trying to squeeze the parcel back into its original shape. "I trust, madame, your smile is a token of your forgiveness."

The smile vanished; the girl flushed and bit her lip.

"We must hurry," she said sharply. "There will be another storm soon."

With a groan Peter shouldered his bundles and footed it apace.

Now he had a mind for conversation.

"Are you not afraid," he asked, "to drive so lonely a road alone?"

"Afraid?" asked the girl simply; "of what should I be afraid?"

"Of foot-pads, highwaymen, knights of the road, and other such rogues and vermin as infest the countryside."

To his amazement the girl stopped and turned on him with a sudden fury.

"Rogues! vermin!" she cried. "How dare you speak of them thus? How dare you? You—a coward who runs at sound of a woman's voice, to speak scorn of men who live by their swords and risk their lives hourly. You—who dare not lift your hand to protect a woman, to dub as 'vermin' men who dare what these men dare! Rogues! quotha! these men who only rob the rich, who fight for every sou they have and risk their lives for every crown; these men who never injure a woman, who help the poor and keep justice in the land? Rogues! you call them! Then what do you call yourselves—you fine gentlemen of the town, who rob your poor that you may take your pleasure at your ease? Who fleece the innocent at cards, mock at justice, and fo. the women—what do you to them? These knights of the road may rob them of their jewels—the Mohocks of St. James's rob them of their souls. Pah! and you—you—would be for calling them 'vermin'! How dare you? how dare you? But I had forgot," she said, checking herself suddenly, and hurrying on, "the tongue is the only weapon a coward dare use."

During this tirade Peter had gazed at the speaker in open-mouthed amazement; now he began to stammer apologies.

"'Pon my soul, madame! you do me an injustice. I never——"

"Be silent," said the girl sharply.

"Truly," thought Peter, "a most disagreeable young woman!"

He dropped behind, and they pursued their way in silence.

In another quarter of an hour their destination hove in sight. A low, rambling, white house, backed by a small coppiece of trees, stood in forlorn isolation at the head of the

track. The house was surrounded by a walled garden, and at one side abutted a few large stables and out-buildings. The path led up to a high wooden gate in the wall, and there stopped abruptly. On every side the lonely downs undulated into the distance. A thin stream of smoke rose from one of the chimneys, and a fierce barking of dogs heralded their approach, otherwise the place looked curiously silent and deserted.

Their approach had evidently been noticed from the windows, for directly they reached the gate it was thrown wide, an old woman and a boy appearing in the doorway. The woman curtsied to her mistress and proceeded to relieve her of her bundles, amid a stream of questions and ejaculations of pity, while the boy led away the pony to the stables.

The girl turned to Peter.

"You can put down your burdens, sir. I—I am grateful for your assistance," she said ungraciously.

But Peter was angry; moreover he wanted a night's lodging. He had no mind to be thus abruptly discarded.

"Pardon me, madame," he stammered, "I would fain claim a reward for my services."

"What do you mean?" she asked haughtily.

"For—er—reasons I cannot well explain, I am at present homeless. I would be mightily grateful for a night's lodging."

The girl turned and eyed him with a quick glance of suspicion.

"A night's lodging! Here? To-night?" she cried. "Impossible!"

"I should be very grateful, madame," he urged. "I have no mind to tramp farther for a supper."

"I am sorry," she answered coldly; "it is quite impossible."

Peter looked through the gateway. He had a vision of a trim garden, bright with flowers, of a hospitably opened doorway; the smoke from the chimney suggested supper. He grew more than ever fixed in his resolve to remain.

"Any hole or corner would do for me, madame," he

urged. "I assure you I am perfectly honest. My name is Peter Wildmore——"

The old woman interrupted him with a little cry.

"Lord Wildmore, sir!" she exclaimed. "Bless me, my lord, I didn't know your lordship. Didn't know you though I've danced you in my arms when you was no bigger than this bag of flour. Though a fine fat baby you was for your age, to be sure. And such legs! Eh, dearie me, my lord, such legs as you had! I've never seen the like."

Peter flushed with embarrassment at this unexpected allusion to his youthful attractions: he glanced down at the limbs in question with mingled feelings of pride and bashfulness.

"'Pon my soul! my good woman, I don't exactly——"

"What! you don't remember your old Nanny Green, your foster-mother as was? What nursed you till you were nigh four years of age, my lord? And a regular little angel you were, my lord, with your big blue eyes, and your dear chubby——"

"Mrs Green! 'Pon my soul! I shouldn't have known you," interrupted Peter, in haste to check further descriptions of his lower limbs. "'Pon my soul!—er—how well you look! I'm—er—delighted to see you. Come, you'll surely play my ally, go bail for my honesty, and persuade this hard-hearted chatelaine to give me a night's lodging?"

With a view to strengthening the alliance further he stooped and implanted a kiss on her ruddy cheek.

The old woman turned reproachfully to her mistress.

"Eh! Miss Bridget, dearie, you'd never be for turning his lordship away on such a night as this?"

"Nonsense!" answered the girl quickly. "You know yourself, Naunny, it is impossible for us to take him in to-night. Let him go back to the Abbey; it is but five miles distant."

She turned to enter the garden. But Peter still held the ducks as hostage; he had not given up hope.

"There is another storm coming up," he said dismally, "and I'm plaguey hungry."

The old woman wrung her hands. "Eh! Miss Bridget dear," she entreated.

Bridget shook her head resolutely, and held out her hand for the ducks.

"'Pon my soul, madame!" exclaimed Peter, with a sudden burst of exasperation,—"'Pon my soul! you are monstrously inhospitable."

The girl started and looked distressed.

"But it is impossible," she urged. "You had better go, my lord. Believe me, this is no place for—a coward."

Peter frowned. "I will take the risk, madame," he answered drily.

Still Bridget hesitated; but the arrival of a fourth on the scene decided the matter.

"What is it, Biddy? what is the matter?" cried a voice impatiently. A pretty fair-haired girl stepped out of the house, and ran down the garden path towards them. The old woman turned to her eagerly.

"If you please, ma'am," she said, "here is my Lord Wildmore begs a night's lodging. He found Miss Bridget with the cart broken down, and carried home her bundles. There's a storm coming on, and he asks for shelter, and Miss Bridget, ma'am, won't have him in."

"But, of course, the gentleman must have shelter," cried the little lady reproachfully. "Biddy, what do you mean? Come in, Lord Wildmore, and be welcome."

Peter stepped through the gate with alacrity, and gallantly kissed the hand of his youthful hostess.

But Biddy brushed past him cavalierly, and drew the little lady aside.

"Julie, what are you doing?" she whispered. "It isn't safe; for all we know he may be a spy. What was he doing on the moor at this hour of the night? Why can't he go back to his own house? Julie, do be careful."

The young hostess knitted her brows in perplexity.

"He hasn't the air of a spy," she said. "Besides, we could watch him: if he did spy he would assuredly be discovered, and what good would it do him then?"

"Small good," agreed Biddy, with a shiver. "He would live to tell no tales, I know, if he were discovered; but

—we must not risk it, Julie. For his own sake we must not risk it; they will be here to-night. What will Michael say?"

"At least Michael would never say I should turn a guest from his door," answered Juliet, with dignity; "and for the danger—who loves a danger better than Mike? There is small risk. We can lodge him in the west room,—he will hear and see nothing there."

"But, Julie——"

Further discussion was interrupted by a sudden flash of lightning and a fierce squall of rain. The old woman snatched up her parcels and ran into the house, the others followed suit pell-mell, and the storm broke.

Their guest once inside the house, no further talk arose of ejecting him. He was handed over to the care of his old foster-nurse, and the ladies, bidding him good-night, hurried off to their own apartments,—Biddy calming her misgivings with the muttered reflection, "After all, the fellow is a rank coward, and more like to shun danger than to seek it."

For his part, Lord Wildmore in nowise regretted the loss of their company. To be sure, his pretty hostess was pleasant enough, and married into the bargain—a great recommendation in his eyes. But for the other——

"An ill-tempered, ill-mannered, inhospitable hussy!" muttered Peter, as he watched her depart.

He followed his foster-mother up two flights of stairs, and along a perfect rabbit-warren of twisting passages and empty rooms, to his apartment, where, in an amazingly short space of time, she served him with a well-cooked supper and an excellent bottle of wine.

Then she snuffed the candles, drew the curtains, replenished the fire, and being finally assured of his comfort, bade him an affectionate good-night and left him to his meditations.

His supper over, Peter drew his chair closer to the fire, filled a pipe, and gazed peacefully round the room. Outside the wind moaned round the house, rattling the windows; but within, the fire crackled cheerily, and the gleam of the candles brightened the ruby in the wine. Truly

his lucky star was in the ascendant,—he had chanced on good quarters.

With a sigh of content he closed his eyes, and sank into a blissful slumber.

Suddenly he awoke with a start, a loud burst of laughter ringing in his ears. He sat up, rubbed his eyes, and looked round the room. The candles were burning brightly, firelit shadows danced on the four bare walls, there was no sound save the moaning of the wind. He shook his head and settled himself again in his chair.

Again the walls echoed to a clamour of boisterous mirth; close beside him, behind him, all around him, the tones rang clear—the room was a very pandemonium of laughter. Then again all was still.

Peter sprang to his feet, seized a candle, and dashed to the door. The passage beyond lay dark and still. He strode a little way along it; empty and silent were the rooms he passed. His candle guttered out in the draught from a window, and he retraced his steps.

"Deuced queer!" he muttered, staring round the empty room. He poured out a glass of wine and lifted it to his lips.

"Pardon me, that's mine," cried a voice behind him.

Peter dropped the glass with a crash and whirled on his heel. Nothing was to be seen save the blue window-curtains waving in the breeze and the dancing shadows on the wall.

It was decidedly uncanny. Peter pushed back his peruke and mopped his brow. He turned and pulled back the window-curtains, and leaning his elbows on the high seat peered out into the darkness.

"Sit down, confound you!" said the voice. This time the sound rose at his elbow. For a moment Peter clutched the curtains and stood transfixed with a grim, uncanny fear; then he pulled himself together.

"Dence take it," he muttered. "There—there's some one hid in the window-seat."

He stooped to examine the place. Just below the seat he noted a deep crack in the panelling. As he leaned down to peer through, he was on the instant surrounded by a

steady murmur of voices which seemed to be in the very room, but which he now perceived rose from below, and re-echoed on the wooden window-seat above as on a sounding-board.

Peter straightened himself, slipped his fingers in the crack, grasped the top of the seat, and with a strong heave lifted it from its place.

He peered down into the cavity revealed, and discerned a flight of stone steps winding down into the darkness. The murmur of voices floated up the funnel of the staircase, a confused babel of sounds, many men talking at once.

Peter's curiosity was awakened. Without further hesitation he climbed over the side of the window-seat and dropped softly down on to the staircase. He took no light; he wished to observe these gentlemen before he committed himself to their company.

He crept down furtively. Suddenly, near the bottom of the steps, the staircase turned abruptly to the right, and a blaze of light glowed through a wide opening at the side, a few yards in front. He paused to accustom himself to the glare, then crept on silently to within a yard of the opening and stood there, crouching in the darkness, staring in amazement at the scene before him.

He found himself standing just inside the mouth of a wide, open fireplace, at the end of a long, narrow hall. There was no fire in the grate, and while keeping in the shadow he was able to lean forward and survey the room.

The chamber was brilliantly lighted with candles in sconces on the wall. Down the centre ran a long table of polished wood, on which were heaped gold coins, gold plate, silver, jewelled ornaments, and little heaps of unset gems, all reflected in the bright surface of the table, flashing a thousand wonderful colours, a blaze of fire and light.

Round the table sat some dozen men, booted and spurred, wearing for the most part high-collared, many-caped riding-coats. All carried swords, and some wore pistols tucked in their belts. There was a singular likeness between them. They wore their own hair, short, or tied closely back in a peruke, their faces were bronzed with wind and weather, their figures were lithe and active, the flesh was spare upon

their cheeks. Their movements were peculiarly quick and quiet, and when they spoke their words were clear and curt. By all tokens they were men of action, quick at decision, alert to every danger.

They lolled round the table in various postures of ease, smoking and toying with the jewels before them, listening with a curious affectation of indifference to their chief as he apportioned the spoil.

The captain of the company, Michael Lefroy, seated at the head of the table, was a curious contrast to his companions. His fair hair hung in shining love-locks round his head. The expression of his face was sweet and dreamy, the handsome features and serious mouth almost ascetic in their clear-cut perfection. His voice was low and sweet, his movements graceful and languid, his whole appearance suggested the elegant dilettante. Only the alert expression of his deep blue eyes gave the lie to his indolence, and left the observer in doubt as to whether he would indeed prove the gentle dreamer his pose suggested. He leaned back in his chair, nursing a toy spaniel, one white hand dextrously sorting the jewels before him.

"The Marchioness of Arlingham's black pearls," he said, holding up a string of the exquisite jewels and fondly running them through his fingers. "Taken by Pat Macarthey on the North Road last July. I trust you were gentle with her ladyship, Pat: she's something elderly for the dangers of travel."

"Gentle, is it?" cried the blue-eyed Irishman thus addressed. "Shure, it's like a new-born lamb I was, and her ladyship a romping tiger-cat. I kissed her hands when I could catch 'em, but she kicked like a fly-bitten mare."

"We must vote you the pearls. You'll doubtless be pleased to have some slight remembrance of her ladyship. Here, catch 'em. And do you go down to-morrow and take the West Road, fifty miles round Bath. There should be good business down there for the next month or so, and plentiful practice for you with the—er—gentler sex."

"Right, Captain."

"The Duchess of Kingston's diamonds are your share, Tom. Here, take them."

Tom Eccles, the terror of the Brighton Road, glanced casually at the diamonds, and tossed them into his pouch. It was a point of etiquette with these knights of the road—the famous “Company of the Masquers,” as they were styled—to show neither elation nor annoyance at the results of their quarterly meeting for the division of spoil.

“That settles the jewels,” continued Captain Lefroy. “Now, has any man any information?”

“There’s company at the Horse and Crow down yonder, and also at Moorstone Abbey—women,” said a man at the lower end of the table.

Peter Wildmore, crouched in the shadow of the fireplace, watching the scene with silent amazement, pricked up his ears, and leaned forward with renewed interest, scanning Lefroy’s face.

“I know,” began the Captain. “I’ll take them when——”

Suddenly the fireplace, the passage, the walls resounded and re-echoed to the cry of “Spy! spy!” Without a second’s warning Peter found himself seized by the scruff of the neck and tossed forward into the room. He landed on his knees, a few feet from Lefroy’s side, while his detector, a wiry, long-armed groom, followed hot-foot on his tracks.

It was characteristic of the company that for a moment not a man moved: they sat in absolute silence, looking coolly down at Peter’s sprawling form. Then, at a sign from Lefroy, two men at the lower end of the table quietly rose and moved to the door, and Tom Eccles stepped before the open window. The others leaned back in their chairs and watched their captive.

After a moment’s pause of utter astonishment Peter scrambled to his feet and dusted his elbows, casting an angry glance over his shoulder at the stolid face of the groom.

Captain Lefroy surveyed him coolly. “Your name, friend?” he asked in his sweet, low voice. “Or are you, perhaps, the devil that lurketh in secret places?”

“I’m Peter Wildmore,” answered Peter bluntly. “Damn you!” he cried, turning on the groom, “why cannot you be more careful?—you’ve half-twisted my neck. What do you mean by it?”

Michael Lefroy's eyes twinkled. "Explain to the gentleman how you came to be so clumsy, Bill," he said softly.

The groom grinned. "If it please your Honour," he said, "this gentleman—er—the mistress sent me up to the west room to see if his lordship wanted for anything. I found the board over the secret stairway lifted away, and followed his lordship down here. He were listening and spying round the corner, so I thought I'd best give 'un a better view."

"Quite right, Bill," answered Lefroy. "I suppose this is the gentleman of whom my wife spoke, who begged for shelter this evening, pleading the laws of hospitality."

"Yes, Captain, Lord Wildmore from the Abbey, cousin to the High Sheriff; and here 'a be, sneaking and spying like any Tom of Coventry."

"Damn you, fellow!" interrupted Peter again. "Is it reasonable a gentleman should find a secret stairway and not descend it?"

"It is unfortunate your lordship didn't think to proceed a few steps farther in your investigations," answered Lefroy drily.

Peter made no answer, but glared at the grinning groom.

"You can leave us, Bill," said Lefroy. The man saluted and left the room.

"A clumsy fellow and rough in his methods, I fear. I apologise to your lordship for this man-handling; but he is a loyal servant, and before all things—honest."

"A cursed clumsy lout," answered Peter angrily, rubbing his elbows. "What business has he to interfere with my actions?"

There was no answer. Something in the peculiar stillness of the onlookers struck him. He looked quickly round the room. Every eye was fixed upon him with a cold, calculating gaze. The sentries at the door stood motionless, their hands upon their swords. A sudden shudder of foreboding chilled his heart. He remembered that to all intents and purposes he had been caught spying, and that these were desperate men.

He took two or three steps forward and spoke eagerly.

"I assure you, gentlemen, I came here with no thought

of spying on your affairs. I know nothing of this house. I only sought shelter from the storm."

No answer! Peter cleared his throat, and hurried on with his explanation:

"I found my way down this passage but from motives of curiosity. I—I had but listened a few moments before this—er—interruption."

Still no answer. Lefroy played with his dog's ears and gazed dreamily up at the ceiling. The members of the band sat smoking with unmoved faces. Peter opened and shut his hands nervously, and looked furtively round the room. His glance rested on the open window. Tom Eccles drew out his pistol and wedged the barrel meditatively in the palm of his left hand.

"It but remains for me to apologise for this intrusion, gentlemen," continued Peter desperately,—"to apologise and—er—give you my word that—er—what little I have heard to-night shall—er—I—er—I will never play traitor."

Silence.

Peter withdrew a few steps towards the fireplace. He heard a gentle click, and turned to find himself covered by Tom Eccles's pistol.

He gave a nervous laugh and spread out his hands.

"As you will," he said with a shrug, and returned to his place.

At last Captain Lefroy spoke.

"Have you anything more to say, my lord?" he asked politely.

"'Tou my soul! what more can I say?" said Peter angrily. "You have my word I'll not play traitor."

Lefroy looked slowly round the circle of attentive faces.

"Will any gentleman here go surety for his lordship?" he asked. No one answered. Lefroy took a pinch of snuff and shook his head.

Peter picked at his ruffles nervously, and looked anxiously from face to face.

"I'll take any oaths you wish," he stammered.

There was a moment's hesitation: then Lefroy asked quietly:

"You hear his lordship, gentlemen? What is the verdict?"

Without a word every man sprang to his feet and drew his sword. They stood absolutely silent, holding aloft their unsheathed weapons, and looking grimly down at their captive.

Lefroy counted the swords and bowed his head. "God have mercy upon him," he said softly.

Peter stared at the speaker. "What's that?" he asked sharply.

"I regret to say, my lord, you are condemned as a spy," explained Lefroy gently.

"Condemned! I! What the plague does this mean?"

"Hanging, my lord," answered Lefroy briefly.

"Ha—hanging!" stammered Peter. "But, Heaven preserve us!—you can't—you can't mean that in sober earnest! It—oh, come! it—it's absurd."

"I rejoice that you see the humour of it, my lord," said Lefroy drily. "You are an example to us all."

"But—you're not in earnest? It's impossible!"

Lefroy shrugged his shoulders and waved his arm round the room.

"Judge for yourself," he said coldly.

Peter stared at the grim faces, at the bare blades flashing above the glitter of the jewels. For an instant he lost courage.

"God help me!" he cried desperately, "you'll never kill me now, in cold blood? Hang me! God! it's too horrible."

Again Lefroy gazed at the ceiling. "A regrettable necessity," he said. "But we have no cause to trust you, and there is no other sure way of silencing a tongue that can tell too much."

"Have—have you no mercy?" muttered Peter huskily, glancing wildly about the room. "My God! I'm helpless. Have you no mercy?"

Again the swords flashed.

"It's your neck or our own," said Lefroy quietly.

"But, damn it all!" he cried in a sudden fury, born of fear, "you will never kill me in cold blood like a rat in a

trap: at least give me a sword, and let me make a fight for it."

Lefroy's eyes gleamed; he sprang to his feet with alacrity.

"Will some one oblige the gentleman with a sword?" he asked.

Half a dozen were proffered: Peter chose one and threw off his coat.

Lefroy placed his dog carefully on the table, playfully winding a string of pearls round its neck.

"It's understood, of course," he said casually, "if his lordship should be so happy as to kill me, he goes free."

"I'll go surety for that," said Eccles, with a grin. A smile went round the table.

Lefroy carefully tucked back his ruffles and drew his sword.

"Quite at your service," he said, with a low bow. His white fingers caressed his blade lovingly as he came on guard.

Scarcely had their blades crossed when the door was flung wide open, and Biddy Lefroy ran into the room.

Lefroy stepped backwards and lowered his sword. Peter followed his example, and turned to see the cause of the interruption.

Biddy ran up the room, but stopped abruptly at sight of Peter. "Oh, he is here!" she cried, in a tone of relief. "We found him flown, and came to warn you." Then she looked at the naked swords and paused. "What is it? What are they doing, Pat?" she asked quickly, seizing the Irishman's arm.

"Sure, the man has been caught spying," he explained briefly. "He is condemned, but the Captain has accepted his challenge."

Biddy nodded, and looked curiously at Peter.

"Come, sister mine, are you satisfied, or do you want to see the play?" asked Lefroy, with a smile.

The girl stood silent, her eyes fixed on Peter's face with a strange, questioning look.

"Come, Biddy," urged her brother, with a touch of impatience.

"Are you—are you going to kill him?" she stammered.

Lefroy shook his head. "The gentleman will do his best to kill me, I take it," he corrected gently. "Come, child, do you want to stay?"

Again she fixed her eyes on Peter's face. He threw up his head and answered her with a shadow of his old whimsical smile.

"There is small chance of running away from the 'vermin' here, madame," he said.

"No—let me stay," she said slowly, taking no notice of Lord Wildmore's challenge. "I—I love to see you fight."

"The cold-blooded little fiend!" muttered Peter.

Lefroy shrugged his shoulders and turned to his opponent.

"Shall we to work again, my lord?" he asked politely.

Again their swords crossed.

A man does not fight his best when he is fighting for his life. Peter rushed his opponent; tried attack after attack without pause, advancing and retreating again incessantly. Lefroy stood almost motionless, parrying the attacks with a scarcely perceptible movement of his wrist. Peter breathed hard, the perspiration rose in beads upon his forehead. For five minutes he made a desperate fight. Then at last Lefroy disengaged and lunged—something wide of his opponent. Peter parried the thrust, and seeing the Captain apparently half-unguarded on the return, he lunged straight out in tierce. In an instant, with a quick half-bind, Lefroy twisted his opponent's sword from his grasp, and sent it spinning across the floor.

"A very pleasant little bout," he said courteously; "but, you see," he added, in polite explanation of his victory, "we live by the sword."

Peter dropped his hands and gazed into the Captain's eyes. For a minute Lefroy played his sword lightly within an inch of his opponent's breast; then he turned and laid it on the table.

"You have five minutes," he said. "I'd be the last to hurry a man to the devil."

He sank languidly into his chair, drew out a gold box of comfits, and selecting one with care, placed it between his

lips; then he picked up the schedule of jewels and resumed his study of its contents.

Peter gazed vaguely about the room. A few paces to the left stood Miss Biddy Lefroy. He noticed that she had dropped her handkerchief; mechanically he crossed to her side and handed it to her with a low bow. She took it without a word, staring at him with frightened eyes.

The men watched his movements furtively. There was no sound in the room save the loud ticking of the clock.

The silence and the watching eyes disturbed him. He crossed to the window and leaned out over the sill. No one hindered him,—he was well covered by Tom Eccles's pistol. The breeze cooled his brow, the sweet scents of the night rose from the rain-kissed earth, he breathed deep of the fragrant air.

In the room behind him some one struck a flint. The sound reminded him of his half-finished pipe lying on his table upstairs beside the ruby wine. He thought he would have liked to smoke once more before he went out into the dark.

A ghost-moth flitted past him in the darkness; it carried his thoughts back to his boyhood, to nights when he had chased them down the Beech Avenue in the valley below. A thousand recollections of childhood surged through his brain.

With a start he pulled himself together and tried to realise the situation, but in vain. His mind still wandered to trivial details. He could not believe that in a few minutes, while that wretched moth would still be flitting blithely through the night, he, who could crush it with a flip of his finger, would have ceased to be. He could not realise that he—that same Peter Wildmore who a few hours since had sat on the river bank sporting with Arabella Fermor—in five minutes—three minutes now—must go to his death. It was impossible!

"At least," he muttered, with his old whimsical smile,—"at least I shall die a bachelor."

How silent was the room behind him! Only the ticking of the clock broke the stillness; how loudly it ticked!—it seemed to drum against his ears: Tick! tick! tick!

Then, in a flash, his brain cleared—he understood all; understood that each tick of the clock meant a second from his life, and he had not two hundred seconds to live! A shudder went through him. How fast the seconds flew! how swiftly, how relentlessly his life was ebbing away! A cold sweat of perspiration broke out upon his brow; he moistened his lips again and again; his heart thumped in his breast, and the muscles of his throat swelled horribly; he tasted fear to the full. He felt the halter round his neck; saw himself—bound and blindfold—dangling limp and twitching from the tree. A blind terror, a wild impotent fury, shook him. And ever the relentless swing of the pendulum beat into his brain. He gripped the window-sill fiercely to hold himself from rushing madly on the clock and shaking its ticking into silence.

Mercifully fear, the most agonising of mental sufferings, is also the shortest lived. In another minute he had himself well in hand, and was conscious of a dim thankfulness that his back was towards the room, that he had no witnesses to his twitching face and trembling hands. With a strong effort he pulled himself together; he lifted his face to the heavens and prayed for mercy and for strength to die like a gentleman.

He heard a chair pushed back in the room behind him, and turned quietly to face his executioners.

"God have mercy on you, my lord!" said Lefroy. "A swift and quiet journey to you."

Tom Eccles laid a hand on his arm, and together they marched down the room towards the door. All the men had risen to their feet and stood, with lowered swords, on either side his path.

Peter noted nothing. His footsteps drummed in his ears, drowning even the ticking of the clock. His head hung low, his lips moved, he was praying for courage to die like a man.

Suddenly there was a cry, a rush of skirts,—they came abruptly to a pause, and Peter looked up to find himself face to face with Biddy Lefroy, who stood with outstretched arms before the door.

"No, no, Mike!" she cried, "you mustn't kill him. I won't have it."

Lefroy turned to her in amazement.

"What—what's all this, sister mine? What is his life to you?"

"He is no spy! Really, really he is no spy. I could swear to it."

"Why do you think so?"

"I—I don't know," she stammered, staring vaguely at her handkerchief, "only, I am sure of it."

Lefroy shrugged his shoulders at the illogical reasoning of women.

"Come, move away, Biddy," he said coaxingly.

But the girl turned and slipped her arm through the staple of the door.

"No, no!" she cried, "he is no spy. Cannot you see it? Would any spy go to his death so? Think of the men we found in the hayloft and then look at him! He's no coward, he cannot be a spy."

"Plague take the child!" muttered Lefroy. "Who said he was a coward. Lord Wildmore is a gentleman, and takes his luck. Let him pass, Biddy."

"It is impossible! Think! he is our guest."

"And has outraged the laws of hospitality."

"Unintentionally! But oh, Mike," she cried with a sob, "you can't kill him. I—I brought him here myself; I won't have him killed."

Lefroy looked at Peter. The sudden hope, the suspense, had almost unmanned him; he was shaking from head to foot.

"Let him pass, Biddy mine," said her brother gently; "it's not kind to keep a gentleman waiting at the foot of the scaffold."

The girl's eyes were full of tears.

"I won't have him killed," she repeated. "I brought him here. What, Michael! Are you afraid to save him? You? Oh! but you must save him, you must! He is no spy. See—I'm one of the band; I'll go surety for him myself."

Lefroy made no answer. He leaned idly against the

table and watched his sister, a whimsical smile curving his lips. The men stood in groups, muttering and shaking their heads.

Peter moistened his lips. "Good Lord! be quick with it," he muttered.

Tom Eccles moved to Biddy's side, whispering to her eagerly, gently trying to untwist her fingers from the staple rings.

Suddenly Lefroy broke into a low, soft laugh. All started at the sound.

"Wait!" he cried, "there's an alternative."

Tom Eccles dropped back from the door, leaving Peter and Biddy side by side. Lefroy looked from one to the other and laughed again.

"From time immemorial," he began, "it has been the honourable custom to hang a spy; but his lordship here denies the accusation, and Biddy Lefroy stands surety for his faith."

He paused, and the men broke into angry murmurings.

"The girl's bewitched!" cried one.

"A woman's surety!" sneered another.

"Hang the spy!" muttered a third.

Lefroy turned and looked slowly round the room, a peculiar glint in his eyes. The murmurs ceased.

"Yes," he continued, "it is conceivable under present circumstances that his lordship might play the traitor if we spared his life; but I think Lord Wildmore would be scarce likely to send his brother-in-law to the gallows."

"What's that?" cried Peter sharply.

Biddy flushed a deep crimson and stared wildly at her brother.

"You are a bachelor, my lord?" asked Lefroy coolly.

"Y—yes," stammered Peter, amazed at the question.

"Ah! that is fortunate; then there is no obstacle to your marrying?"

"To—to my marrying!" gasped Peter. "But—I've no intention of marrying. I—I strongly object to it."

Lefroy smiled. "Ah! well, my lord, if you'd rather hang we will say no more."

Peter looked wildly round the room.

"Good heavens!" he muttered, "is that the alternative?"

"We are sorry, my lord, to doubt your word, but we can only repose absolute trust in a member of the family. Come, what say you? Shall it be the noose or the ring?"

Life beckons very sweetly to the condemned man. A moment only Peter hesitated. To be sure he had no mind to marry, but then he had certainly no mind to die. The Fates were too strong for him; with a sigh he yielded his liberty.

"Time was," he said, with a smile "when I swore I'd rather die than marry. But death looks mightily unattractive at close quarters. I—er—shall be honoured by the alliance."

He spoke, and sighed again. Was ever poor bridegroom more harried to the sacrifice? But he who has stood at the foot of the scaffold wastes few regrets over the price he pays for his life. So his eyes brightened, his lips relaxed their tension, and he smiled as he looked anew upon life and found it good.

But Biddy flung up her head angrily.

"What do you mean, Michael?" she cried.

"Mean! Why, what I say. Come, wench, wilt have him?"

"Have him? Marry him? I! Certainly not!" cried Biddy, with flaming cheeks.

Lefroy threw back his head and laughed heartily.

"Rejected, *per Bacchus!*" he cried gaily. "Come, my lord, woo her, woo her, if you'd win the lass."

Peter turned and gazed helplessly at the girl.

An amused smile went round the circle of attentive faces.

"I should—er—be monstrously—er—honoured, madame——" he stammered with much embarrassment.

Biddy brushed him aside and crossed to her brother.

"What jest is this, Mike?" she asked angrily.

Lefroy patted her cheek. "No jest, sister mine, rather a most advantageous alliance on both sides. You'll be my Lady Wildmore, and jig it in the town with the best; and for the rest—your pedigree is as old as his, and you bring your groom a richer dower than ever bride before, to wit,

his life. 'Tis an excellent alliance. And I'll go surety your husband shall treat you well."

"But, Mike, how could I wed him—a coward and a spy?"

Lefroy shrugged his shoulders resignedly.

"But, Biddy, you have just sworn to us that he is neither one nor the other. See, child, you can't have a man's life without paying the price, and no woman can go surety for a man except he be her husband. Marry him if you choose and his life is yours; if you don't choose to wed him let him go hang. It's all one to me. What say you?"

Biddy flushed. "Nonsense, Michael! I can't marry him," she muttered.

Again Lefroy laughed, and the others echoed his laughter.

"Second rejection!" he cried. "Come, my lord, do your own wooing; I'm making a plaguey poor business of it for you."

But Peter looked at the girl's flushed cheeks and down-cast eyes, and the kindly little man's heart was touched.

"No," he said stoutly, "if the lady doesn't wish to marry me, I'll have none of it."

"What!" cried Lefroy, "you're not for wooing her, eh?"

"If she is willing to marry me, well and good; but she shall never be constrained to marry to save my life. I'll be hanged if she shall."

"You'll be hanged if she won't," said Lefroy drily. But he nodded his head as though the words pleased him well.

Peter bit his lip, but made no answer. Biddy watched him furtively under her lashes, and wrinkled her brow.

Lefroy looked from one to the other and laughed.

"Perhaps your lordship would like a little leisure to woo in, eh? Egad! it does require a practised tongue to win a woman's heart in five minutes. What do you say, gentlemen? Supper should be served. Shall we give his lordship an hour's reprieve and ample opportunity for wooing? I've a mind to have him for a brother-in-law. What say you?"

"Agreed!" they cried, sheathing their swords. In truth, the jest had softened their resentment,—they were disposed to regard their captive with favourable eyes.

"Then we grant him an hour for love-making. If he

fail, what matter? At least he will spend his last hour in the best of all occupations. Take him up to the library, Tom. Come, Biddy mine, come and be wooed."

But Biddy snatched away her hand angrily.

"Nonsense, Mike, I won't have it. 'Tis absurd."

"What! you won't hear his wooing? Then take him out and hang him, Tom."

"Oh, no, no!" cried the girl in horror.

Lefroy shook his head in mock perplexity.

"Plague take you, child, what will you have? Look you, Biddy, you've dragged him down from the gallows,—it's only manners to give him a chance for life."

"But—but—oh! it's impossible!"

"Impossible! Nonsense! I've known hearts won in less time than it takes to empty a bottle. Come, I insist. Take him upstairs, Tom. Put Bill at the door, and loose the Bruiser under the window; he will be safe enow. Put away these baubles," he added, pointing to the jewels, "and let's to supper. Come, Biddy, your hand."

Tom put his hand on Peter Wildmore's shoulder, and marched him out of the room. Captain Lefroy followed, escorting his sister. After them came the rest of the company laughing and whispering.

As they ascended the stairs Michael stooped and peered at his sister's face. Her brows were drawn down in a perplexed frown, and her lips pouted indignantly.

"Egad!" he cried, with a soft laugh, "his lordship's like to have a stormy wooing. But it's not to be doubted a man will woo right eloquently when both love and life are at stake."

He led his sister into the room where Peter already awaited her. He glanced from Peter's embarrassed countenance to Biddy's downcast eyes, and again he laughed sottly.

"We meet again in an hour, my lord," he said, bowing to Lord Wildmore. "I wish you good fortune. Woo her heartily, man, heartily."

With another laugh he withdrew and shut the door.

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When the echo of Captain Lefroy's laughter had died away, Peter turned helplessly from the closed door to the girl, who stood with averted head gazing out of the window. Never had he felt more absolutely and inexpressibly embarrassed. Here was he, Peter Wildmore, the apostle of Bachelordom, shut up for an hour with an angry girl, condemned to win her favour or die! It was a horrible situation! Surely even the avenging Dianas, who had driven him to this plight, had pitied him could they have seen him now.

He drew out his handkerchief and mopped his brow, staring helplessly at Biddy, who for her part presented to him a most discouraging back, and continued to gaze resolutely out into the night.

He advanced a few steps timidly and came to a pause. Having once made up his mind to woo, he was eager to get it over; but it was a plaguesome difficult thing to do. He had never in his life before made love to a woman; he had not the remotest notion how to begin. If only she would move or speak it would be easier, but she did neither.

Peter had a low opinion of his powers of attraction. Were Harry Ford in his place, he did not doubt ten minutes had sufficed, but for himself—a year seemed insufficient time in which to win a wife. However, the affair was imperative. He cleared his throat and plunged into the subject.

"It's not to be denied, madame, I am not in love with you——" he began. Then it struck him that this remark left much to be desired in its wooing capacities. He hesitated, and tried again.

"What I mean, madame, is—er—that—er—in fact, I've never been in love with a woman in my life, though I have the—er—greatest admiration for your sex, and—er—for your person, and—so forth. If you can find it in your mind to marry me, madame, I shall ever—er—remember it with gratitude, and study my life through to—er—pleasure you."

He paused for breath. No answer came from the girl

at the window. She neither moved nor spoke. Peter sighed, he did not appear to be making much progress, and the hour was slipping rapidly away. He tried to recall some of the passionate addresses so minutely described by Sir Harry Ford in his accounts of his many gallantries. The only one he could remember that appeared at all appropriate to the occasion was the assertion that he would die without her favour, and under the circumstances this seemed rather too obvious a fact to be worth mentioning. He was dimly conscious that it behoves a suitor to make some references to his lady's incomparable loveliness; but he could not recollect any point of incomparable loveliness to which to refer. He stared helplessly at the curly brown hair and wondered what the deuce was the colour of her eyes.

From the supper-room came the sounds of increasing revelry. Peter dashed again into the fray, commending the only quality he could recollect.

"Madame, 'pon my soul, you have the most adorable voice in Christendom," he ventured. Then it struck him that this might sound a trifle ironical in view of the lady's persistent silence. He grew hot and anxious and stammered more than ever.

"I'm afraid I've a plaguey poor tongue for wooing, madame. I—I never thought to—er—ask a woman to marry me. I—er—I've not much to offer you, I fear, in return for the—er—the incomparable gift of your hand; but there's the title, and—er—a reasonable fortune, and—er—a house or two; my arm to protect you (though I made a deuced poor business of protecting myself this evening), and—er—all my powers to study your welfare. 'Pon my soul, madame, I think I could make you happy."

He ceased, proud of his effort. Still no answer.

Peter lost all patience.

"'Pon my soul, madame, you might speak, if it is only to refuse me," he cried desperately.

He was electrified by the sound of a stifled sob.

For a moment he stood petrified with surprise; then he strode to her side, seized her by the shoulder, and uncere-

moniously whirled her round to face him. She was weeping bitterly.

"Good heavens, madame!" he stammered in astonishment. "What the saints! I had no notion you—— What a brute! What an infernal shame! For Heaven's sake, madame, don't cry like that. Of course, you shall not marry me. Your brother is a scoundrel to suggest it."

"Oh! no," she sobbed. "Michael is right. It is only fair. I should not have interfered."

"But—my dear child—I'm most grateful for your interference. Most grateful! What! I've an hour's reprieve; anything may happen in an hour. And if not—why, I can die as well an hour hence as now. Only, for Heaven's sake, don't cry, madame; you are not to blame."

"Oh! but I am. I brought you here. I would not have you hanged, and Michael is right, my marriage is the only way—and—and——"

"You don't wish to marry me? Of course not, madame. It is er—er—most natural, a beautiful young creature like yourself. Gad! it's a monstrous suggestion," cried Peter indignantly, all his chivalry and tenderness awakened at sight of her distress.

"Oh! no, not that——" stammered Biddy; "but—I'm not vastly inclined to marry any one."

"No more am I, madame," cried Peter, looking at her with genuine admiration. Truly here was the most sensible of her sex.

"Oh! but I must," she sobbed. "If I do not, you will die."

"But I vow I will rather die than marry you," he cried ungallantly. "That is to say—of course—I—I don't mean that," he broke off with a laugh.

The girl started at the sound and shivered.

"Oh, don't!" she cried. "Don't laugh. It is too horrible. See!"

She pointed through the open window. Peter drew nearer to her side and looked out. The storm had passed, the moon sailed low in a cloud-flecked sky, weaving strange lights and shadows over the fair face of the downs. A few yards from the window, at the edge of the little copse, stood

a yew-tree: from one of its branches dangled a rope and noose, swaying lightly in the breeze. Peter shivered and looked away.

"Ah! well," he muttered, "many a better man than I has danced on air. Why the deuce should I complain?"

"Oh! what can I do?" wailed Biddy. Sinking into a chair, she buried her face in her arms and broke out again into bitter weeping.

Peter eyed her desperately. It had seldom been his lot to hear a woman weep—in earnest. It had for him all the terror of the unknown. He listened to her sobs in an agony of pity. Of all the horrible occurrences of this unprecedented evening, this surely was the worst.

"For God's sake, child," he pleaded, "don't cry like that. I swear by Heaven you shall not marry me. 'Pon my honour, I'd rather hang. What! I've sworn a thousand times I would rather die than marry; any man in London will tell you so. See here, child, half the women in London are trying to make me wed. I ran away rather than wear the ring."

Biddy paused in her sobs to listen. "But—but why should they wish to marry you?" she asked bluntly.

"I don't know, madame, and it's not to be supposed they do. But see, child, what little cause you have to fear. 'Pon my soul, I wouldn't marry you—even to save your own neck."

"But you told Michael you would," she interposed quickly.

"Ah! but then I supposed you willing."

"Willing?" she cried in surprise. "How could I be willing? Why, I had scarce spoken to you. Are then your ladies o' London willing to marry any man they meet?"

"Egad! child, some would marry a joint-stool if it would have 'em," cried Peter, laughing.

She frowned. "I don't believe you, my lord," she said softly.

"As you will, madame, and indeed I'm not an authority upon your sex. But for this present matter, knowing your unwillingness, believe me nothing would constrain me to

marry you. Why, child, I—I'd rather die a dozen times than see you weep." Unconsciously Peter was growing quite gallant.

Biddy sighed. "I'm sorry I called you a coward, my lord," she said softly.

"I' faith, child, you weren't far from the mark," he answered with an unsteady laugh. "Even now I prefer not to look yonder,"—he pointed over his shoulder at the yew-tree's burden.

The girl shivered and sat for a while in silence, gazing up at the stars.

"I wonder," she said at last, "if the saints wish me to marry you."

"Madame?"

"I wonder," she repeated gravely, "if it be Heaven's will that I should marry you."

Peter looked embarrassed. "Do you suppose, madame, the heavens concern themselves with such affairs as this?"

She turned to him in amazement. "Why, of course," she said simply. "What else?"

Peter was silent.

"Now," she continued dreamily, "the Sisters in Paris told me that marriages are made in heaven, and that my brother would direct me on earth. But—Michael always bids me choose for myself. Now it may be that Heaven has sent you to wed me; but how can I tell! Oh, how I wish I knew what it were right for me to do!"

Peter sat silent, looking down at her in wonder. An implicit faith in the direct intervention of Providence, coupled with a whole-hearted desire to do the will of Heaven, were not the most noticeable characteristics of the women he had hitherto known.

Biddy looked up at him in innocent perplexity.

"Juliet says it is sinful to marry without love," she pursued thoughtfully, "but the Sisters ever taught us that only by following Heaven's will can we know true love. Now—if the saints wish that I should marry you—and it would save your life—oh! what must I do?" She lifted her head and gazed out into the night with puzzled brows.

And now a sudden temptation came to Peter—a temptation so swift, so strong, that he had wellnigh yielded ere he remembered his manhood. For he saw on a sudden how simple a matter it would be to persuade this child, with her innocent faith, that it was her duty to marry him. It should be an easy matter indeed to prove that their unexpected meeting, her interference in his death, her brother's eccentric proposal, all clearly pointed to the direct intervention of Heaven in favour of their marriage, and that if she blinded herself to these signs from above she would be virtually a murderess.

In a flash he understood her, her faith and her innocence; he saw the way to woo, the way to win her—her and life. And behind him, dark-shadowy in the moonlight, stood the yew-tree. He could hear its branches creaking in the wind.

He drew in his breath quickly and leaned nearer to the girl. He saw his lucky star still shining on the horizon, saw life once more within his reach. Words of persuasion rushed to his lips.

She moved her head a little and the moonlight illumined her face. She lifted her dark eyes and he read the trouble in their depths—the trouble and the innocence.

With a start he drew back and clenched his fists. All the chivalry, all the kindness of his nature, rebelled at the thought of what he was about to do. This child was too young, too innocent, to be duped into marriage to save his wretched life. To take advantage of her pure faith and so trick her into wedlock, surely he were a scoundrel to dream of it. With all his scoffs, with all his whimsicalities and eccentricities, Peter was essentially chivalrous. And yet—he would treat his life well, and—the yew-tree was behind him. Surely none but a fool would hesitate.

He rose abruptly and strode about the room. Biddy did not move; she gazed up at the starlit heavens, praying for guidance in this strange crisis of her life. From the supper-room came ever and anon the sound of voices and laughter, the clatter of glasses and plates. Outside the breeze whispered through the coppice, and the branches of the yew-tree creaked. In the room the lamp burned low and flickered in the draught, but the clear moonlight illumined the slight

figure of the girl at the window, and kissed the gold in her hair. So Peter fought out his fight betwixt chivalry and fear.

At last he paused in his walk and crossed to her side. He leaned over the back of her chair and looked out into the night.

"Look you, child," he said softly, "these matters are too high for me. I've railed against matrimony often enow, but I've given plaguey little real thought to the subject. But it's my belief the saints—being for the most part women themselves—would all be in favour of a love-match. 'Pon my honour, they'd never wish a woman to risk her happiness by giving her hand without her heart."

He spoke lightly. He was deliberately turning his back upon his one chance for life, but he would brook no tragic pose. Truly the little man could play the hero bravely.

Biddy put up her hand and touched his fingers.

"You are very good, my lord," she said softly.

"Tut, child," he answered, patting her hand, "if a woman has any right at all in the world (which some doubt), she has surely the right to marry where she loves."

Biddy looked out dreamily into the night.

"Oh!" she broke out with a sudden impatience—"how difficult it is to see the right."

"Not nearly so difficult as to do it, madame," answered Peter drily.

Biddy shook her head. "Surely," she said simply, "if we could see the right we should do it."

"Alas! madame, the saints for the most part have their dwellings in heaven; there are not many of them upon earth. But for my part, I do not believe this life of ours so perplexing a matter as some would have us think. I hold if a man speak the truth and behave like a gentleman, Heaven will find mercy for his mistakes."

They waited awhile in silence.

Suddenly the clock in the hall below chimed the three-quarters. At the sound the girl turned to him with a cry of horror.

"Ah! Jesu!" she muttered. "You have but a quarter of an hour to live."

Peter started. "Is that so?" he asked quietly. "Ah! well, the sooner I am through with it the better."

But Biddy caught his arm with a sob of terror.

"No, no, my lord!" she cried. "You cannot hang now. You have been so good to me—so good and so brave. Ah, I cannot let them hang you now."

"There is no help for it, madame," answered Peter huskily, turning away to the window.

Still she clung to his arm.

"No, no!" she cried. "Indeed, I cannot suffer it now. I cannot endure it. Anything were better than that. That you must die—in ten minutes—oh, it is horrible! I—I cannot bear it."

"Don't, child," he said unsteadily. "What is my life to you?"

She struggled to her feet and stood gazing at him wide-eyed—a look on her face as of one newly awakened from sleep. Her cheeks were flushed, her breath came quickly.

"You—to die—in ten minutes," she murmured slowly. "Oh! no, it cannot be." With sudden resolution she threw up her head and stepped towards him. "Please, my lord, will you marry me?" she asked quietly.

Peter whirled round and faced her. "What's that?" he asked sharply.

Biddy drooped her eyes and blushed yet more deeply crimson.

"Will you please to marry me, my lord?" she whispered. "I—I wish it."

Peter stared at her. His heart beat quickly, but he held himself well in hand. He took her hands and looked down gravely into her eyes.

"See here, child," he said gently, "you don't understand what you say. Out of pity for my misfortune you would marry me to-night, but in a week you would hate me. You don't know what a hell your life would be then."

"You would be good to me?" she said quickly.

He stooped and kissed her hands. "God helping me, I would. But it's impossible!" he broke off quickly. "Impossible! What! let you sacrifice your happiness to save my wretched neck! What manner of a scoundrel do you

think I am? I may be—er—a bit of a coward, but I'm not so black-hearted a villain as that."

But Biddy snatched away her hands and wrung them desperately together.

"Oh! no, my lord, don't talk like that. Ah! don't waste time with words, the minutes go so quickly. Ah! won't you marry me, my lord?"

"No, I won't!" cried Peter stoutly. How could he take advantage of her pity?

Biddy looked round wildly. "Oh! but you must, you must," she entreated desperately. "Indeed, I cannot endure it else."

"I will not," he cried stubbornly.

The tears dimmed her eyes, she clasped his arm with desperate earnestness.

"Oh! what can I say?" she muttered. "What can I say? I cannot endure your death. You have been so good to me. Ah! let what may come of it, my lord, I entreat you to marry me."

The sweat rose on his brow, but he withstood her resolutely.

"Nonsense, child. You shall not sacrifice yourself."

She lowered her eyes suddenly.

"But, Lord Wildmore," she muttered, "do you not understand? There—there would be no sacrifice."

"What do you mean, child?" asked Peter breathlessly.

"There would be no sacrifice," she repeated slowly, "because—because—— Ah! if you die to-night, my lord, there will be no more happiness for me. You ask what is your life to me. Indeed," she whispered simply, "I think it is all the world."

Peter stared at her downcast eyes and flushed cheeks.

"Is this possible?" he asked slowly.

A little smile curved her lips. "An hour ago I should have answered 'No,' but now I see that in love all things are possible. My lord, I think you are the most gallant gentleman in all the world: I shall be proud to be your wife."

Peter took her hand and drew her nearer.

"Are you sure, madame, that this is not pity?" he asked gravely.

Biddy shook her head. "Why should I pity you?" she asked simply. "You did not fear to die."

Peter wisely left this statement unchallenged.

They stood a moment, silent, hesitating. The lamp flickered and went out, leaving them in the silver moonlight. In the distance they heard the opening of the door of the supper-room.

Suddenly Biddy put her hands on his arm and lifted her face to his.

"Lord Wildmore," she said simply, "I think God has made me love you. Will you not marry me now?"

Peter looked down into the dark eyes, so full of innocence and trust. With a sudden impulse, that surprised himself as much as the girl, he stooped and kissed the white brow, below the brown curls.

"Thank God," he said softly, "for my wife."

So Peter Wildmore was wooed!

VI.

Two minutes later the door was flung open, and in the stream of light from the passage appeared the person of Michael Lefroy. He looked doubtfully at the two figures by the window.

"Well, my lord," he said sternly, "how have you sped?"

Peter laughed softly, and took the girl's hand in his.

"I've cheated the devil this time," he said, "and claim the honour of an entrance into your family."

Michael's face brightened.

He strode across the room, and taking his sister in his arms kissed her heartily, an unwonted look of tenderness in his eyes.

"The saints bless you, little one," he said softly. "I congratulate you heartily, my lord, on your wooing. I misdoubted you'd scarce win her. Come away to supper, child—Julie is waiting for you. You'll follow us, my lord, and be introduced to my wife, eh?"

He slipped his arm through his sister's and led her from the room. Peter turned, leaned out of the window, and

shook his fist furtively at the dangling rope; then he followed his host.

Supper was nearly over, but the wine circulated freely. The Masquers eyed Peter good-humouredly,—it was clear they were prepared to take his marriage to their captain's sister as surety of his good faith. Tom Eccles proposed the health of the couple, and the company drank it boisterously. Only Patrick McCarthey looked yearningly at Biddy's shining eyes and sighed over his wine.

As for Peter, his spirits rose gaily. To spend an hour face to face with death, and then to sit down to his wedding-feast, is a sequence of circumstances few men could experience calmly. He thought of Lady Betty plotting against his peace, and chuckled.

Suddenly Lefroy turned to him.

"You've a priest and chapel down at the Abbey yonder?" he said.

"Yes. What then?"

"Good. You are equal to an hour in the saddle, Biddy? Then we'll see the knot tied to-night."

Biddy looked up quickly. "To-night!" she cried.

Lefroy nodded. "No gain in delay when priest and chapel are at hand. All the company can play your groomsmen. I doubt not his lordship will right gladly speed the affair, and escape further—er—surveillance. What say you, Lord Wildmore?"

The notion of stealing into his private chapel and being married at midnight, within a few yards of Lady Betty Acton's slumbering form, tickled Peter's humour.

"With all my heart," he cried; "if the bride be willing, you'll never find me laggard. We'll rouse Father Stevens out of his slumbers to make us fast, and a couple or so of servants can be my witnesses."

"What say you, gentlemen?" asked Michael. "Will you ride with the bride to her wedding, before you take the road again?"

"That we will," cried the Masquers heartily. "And see the knot tied fast," added Tom Eccles with meaning.

"You'll ride with us, Julie? Then away, sweet, and see you and Biddy are ready to set out in half an hour."

When the girls had left the room Patrick crossed to Peter's side.

"The devil take you, Wildmore," he said huskily, "but you are a lucky fellow. I'd have tried for the colleen myself, but the Captain has said she mustn't wed the profession, and, by the saints! he is right. I'm glad you've won her, my lord—here's my hand upon it, and I'll stand your friend till I swing. But—mark this—if you don't make her the happiest wife in England, by the powers I'll make her a widow, my lord!"

"Egad! a fair offer," cried Peter, with a laugh, "for, by heaven, were I married to a weeping wife I'd as lief she became a widow."

A horse galloped into the courtyard; hurried footsteps echoed in the hall below. Without pausing in his conversation every man, half unconsciously, loosened his sword in his sheath.

Presently Bill the groom entered, followed by a small man, whose lower limbs announced his profession to the world. He bowed to the company, and stood biting the lash of his whip in the manner common to ostlers and postboys the world over.

Captain Lefroy nodded to him encouragingly.

"Well, Joe, my lad," he said, "what news from the White Crow? Travellers on the road at this hour of the night, eh?"

Joe took courage and cleared his throat.

"Pardon for intruding," he said. "An elderly party in a coach, driving his own horses, came in at noon. His man gives him out as a London gentleman been down to the country for his rents. Never saw the party before, Captain, so can't vouch for it. But he carries a large black box, and swears something fearful if any of us go to lay a finger on it. He gave orders to take the road again at ten to-night, Captain, and should pass by Gibbet Corner at the half hour. His groom and his own man on the box, a servant behind, with Bandy Bill and Silas, postboys, please your honour."

"*Per Bacchus!* he takes the road at a strange hour!" cried Lefroy.

"Swore 'twere too damned hot to travel by day, Captain. Silas bid him beware of highwaymen—saving your honour's presence—but he swore roundly he would put an ounce of lead into any who came within range of his gun."

"Gad sakes! A lusty cockerell!" cried Tom Eccles, with a laugh.

Joe started at his voice, and eyed him thoughtfully. "Queer!" he muttered to himself; "I could ha' sworn to the voice."

Lefroy rose lazily to his feet. "What do you say, boys, shall we take the road for half an hour before we set out for the wedding? I've a mind to test the aim of this gentleman's pistol. You shall ride with me, Tom, and Jim there—he complains of a dull time of late. We should be well through with the affair by eleven o'clock."

"I am with you, Captain," cried Jim with alacrity. "What do you think, Joe—will the gentleman really make a stand?"

"Couldn't say for sure, sir. But he's a mighty hot-tempered gentleman. Kicked me down the stairs for bringing him the wrong pair of boots."

"St Patrick! A promising blade," cried Lefroy joyously. "Bring my coat, Bill. Come, boys, we shall be back by eleven. Should any—er—accident occur, Pat, you must give away the bride. *Au revoir*, my lord."

Peter sprang to his feet.

"Let me ride with you," he cried.

"You, Lord Wildmore?" cried Lefroy doubtfully.

"Yes. Gadzooks! it's the chance of a lifetime," cried Peter, with eager entreaty. "What! I'll be a sober married man to-morrow,—let me have a dash to-night!"

"Let him ride with you, Mike, to be blooded as one of the band," interposed Pat. "If he is in with us in this affair it will prove his good faith."

"But what will Biddy say?" asked Lefroy.

"Egad! Biddy shall say what she chooses—to-morrow."

Lefroy clapped him on the back. "By the powers! you'll be a bachelor spoilt," he said, half-regretfully. "You shall ride with us to-night, but to-night only. You must give us your word after your marriage to leave the work alone."

"Egad! Do you suppose I'd make a hobby of it, man?"

A quick look went round the table.

"Don't sneer at the drunkard till you've tasted the wine," said Tom Eccles solemnly.

All four were soon equipped in high-collared riding-coats, wide-brimmed hats, and red masks. The three highway-men looked to the priming of their pistols, but offered only a sword to their guest,—evidently they had not relaxed their caution.

Four horses stood saddled at the door. They mounted and rode out into the night.

They galloped for a mile and a half, and then struck the wide white road, winding over the downs to the north. Where it topped the summit of the ascent a track crossed it, going east and west, and at these four cross-roads, on a little triangular patch of green, stood a withered tree, stretching out one long branch, gallows-wise, towards the west, a landmark for miles round. A few yards down the hill towards the south, a fair-sized stretch of wood bordered the road which wound through it, and disappeared in the shadow of the trees. Here they drew rein. Not a living creature was in sight, but far below in the valley a light still twinkled in the window of the inn, and from the distance came the melancholy long-drawn howl of a dog baying at the moon.

Lefroy dismounted and drew out his watch.

"Five minutes from the half hour. Our gentleman should be here presently. Ride to the end of the trees, Jim, and signal us when he is in sight. You can draw their fire if you like. For my part, I've no prejudice in favour of meeting a loaded pistol."

Jim cantered down the road, hugging the grass border beneath the shadow of the trees.

Lefroy threw off his hat and mask, and leaned idly against the gallows-tree. He leaned his head back upon his arms and gazed up at the silver-tipped clouds chasing the moon. The moonlight shed a halo round his fair head, and illumined his handsome face and his deep serious eyes. He looked like an entranced saint.

"What a night!" he murmured dreamily. "What a

night for love! Ah! believe me, Lord Wildmore, your bachelor is but half a man."

"Yet is he the lustier half—to my way of thinking," answered that unrepentant bachelor cheerfully, "and should prove the better fighter. There's nothing shakes a man's nerve like the thought of his wife."

Lefroy smiled and shook his head.

"You are wrong there. What better encouragement has a man to fight well than the knowledge that, should he fall, a dear saint will weep her eyes out in masses for his soul, and win him to heaven on the flood of her prayers and tears. If a bachelor fall—why, he is but a bachelor the less, whereas——"

"Whereas if a benedict die he becomes promptly a blessed martyr," interrupted Tom Eccles, that graceless man. "I grant you that, Captain. But for myself, I'd ask a short life and a free one, and then—a Valhalla which inscribes round its portals the words 'Women not admitted'!"

Peter solemnly grasped the speaker's hand, and shook it heartily in token of agreement. Lefroy eyed him with a whimsical smile.

"Gadzooks! my lord, for a bridegroom elect you seem monstrously in favour of celibacy."

Peter shook his head. "Egad! I'm not the first man who has sacrificed his principles for——"

"His life," suggested Tom Eccles.

Lord Wildmore gazed dreamily across the moor, and a strange smile touched his lips.

"No," he said softly, "for—a woman."

A low whistle sounded down the road. Lefroy turned briskly to his companions.

"That's Jim's signal, they are in sight. Steady, Beauty! There are two men on the box—you can take them, Tom. You stop the horses, Wildmore; you had better dismount, you can hold them better. Jim will look to the postboys. Bill will give no trouble, but Silas is a devil with his whip. Guard your head. I'll talk to the old gentleman, and quiet the fellow behind. By the bye, Lord Wildmore, you quite understand, should you play the traitor the first shot is for

you? It's well to have a clear understanding on such matters."

A couple of shots rang out in the distance.

"What's that?" cried Lefroy sharply. "Sure, Jim must be playing us false and taking the job himself. No, here he is. What's the gentleman firing at, eh, Jim?"

"I dunno. The moon I should say. There's nothing else in sight."

"Zeus! He's plaguey ready with his pistol. It smacks of an unsteady nerve. Get into cover, boys, and don't show till the horses are abreast of us; then charge, and look out for the lead."

They drew back under the dark shadows of the trees, and waited. Peter's heart was beating with a wild excitement he had never before experienced. He glanced at his companions; they sat immovable in their saddles, but the glint in their eyes, and the smile that curved Lefroy's lips, showed that they, too, were not impervious to the enjoyment of the moment.

Now they could hear the galloping of the hoofs on the hard road, the straining and creaking of the harness as the coach began the ascent. But above this rose another sound—a high angry voice pouring forth a steady stream of abuse.

"By ——! you —— fellows. You'd gallop my horses up this hill, would you? By ——! Walk them, walk them, and be damned to you! What the ——! Highwaymen, quotha? I'll not have my horses flogged up any —— hill for all the —— —— highwaymen in Christendom. Damn you! Ease them, ease them you —— scoundrels."

Lefroy laughed softly. "By the Lord Harry! A lusty blade. With the rarest tongue. There's sport towards, boys."

Jim shook his head doubtfully. "He crows too loud," he muttered distrustfully.

The horses were sobered to a walk. The coach slowly drew near—in another minute the horses were abreast of them.

"Halt!" cried Lefroy sharply, and they sprang out on to

the road. Peter ran lightly to the leaders' heads and caught at their bits. The postilion on the wheeler rolled quietly off on to the ground and into the ditch, but the second postboy lifted his whip with a shout and lashed furiously at the horses, urging them on to a gallop. They reared and plunged—Peter clung to them gallantly. Again the whip descended, the end of the long lash whirling round his head. But in another second Jim had scrambled on to the near horse, and seizing the postboy by the scruff of his neck tossed him on to the road and grasped the reins of the leaders.

Meanwhile Tom Eccles had covered the servants on the box with his pistol: they held up their hands without further parley. The man behind, with praiseworthy neutrality, fired off both barrels of his blunderbuss up into the air and dropped his hands, while Lefroy wrenched open the door of the coach and held his pistol at the head of the passenger. The work was done.

Then a strange thing befell.

Tom Eccles turned to speak to Lefroy. He stared for a second at the angry face of the old gentleman in the coach, his jaw dropped, he gave a sudden exclamation of horror, turned his horse, and galloped away into the wood.

"What the deuce, Tom——" began Lefroy. But it was no time for questions. This sudden desertion put a very different complexion on the affair. The two servants on the box were not slow to take advantage of their unexpected deliverance. Both were armed; one covered Jim with his pistol, the other raised a mighty blunderbuss and pointed it full at Peter Wildmore. The latter sought cover behind the horses, but now Silas—the resolute postboy—scrambled again to his seat, and whirling his whip began to rain blow after blow on Peter's defenceless head.

For a minute it seemed that luck was turning. Even the cautious man behind bethought himself to reload his weapon, in case further show of zeal should be required of him. Then Lefroy shifted the weapon covering the passenger into his left hand, and drawing a second pistol from his belt sent a steady "right and left" through the

arm of Jim's opponent and the shoulder of the servant at the back.

With a yell the men dropped their weapons, and on the instant Jim scrambled on to the box and closed with the two servants in a fierce rough-and-tumble fight.

Meanwhile the horses, maddened by the shots, were plunging wildly, while Peter clung to their bits and tried vainly to dodge the blows of the postboy's whip. It was fortunate that Silas, in the stress of the moment, forgot to use the butt end. Jim saw his plight, but, hampered by his two opponents, could give him no assistance.

"Shoot him!—Wildmore, you fool, shoot him!" he shouted. As Peter had no weapon with which to shoot, the advice seemed to him hardly apt. Nevertheless, he let go the reins with one hand and tried to draw his sword. The horses broke into a gallop, dragging him with them.

Suddenly two shots, in quick succession, echoed from the wood behind. The two leaders, shot through the head, fell to the ground, dragging Peter and the postboy with them. The wheelers stumbled and fell, a snorting, struggling mass, nearly overturning the coach.

With the sudden stopping of the vehicle the men on the box lost their balance and fell forward on to the horse, losing their grip of each other in their efforts to save themselves.

Lefroy galloped up and began wildly cutting at the traces with his sword. Jim struggled to his feet and pulled his whilom opponents out of reach of the hoofs, thoughtfully knocking their pistols out of their hands. Together they went to the rescue of Peter and dragged him out from under one of the dead leaders: he was unhurt. The wheelers struggled to their feet and stood trembling, a mass of foam. The game seemed at last in their hands. The servants were disarmed, Silas, the postboy, lay stunned by his fall, the man behind had disappeared.

Suddenly the old gentleman emerged from the coach, a pistol in each hand, and began shooting promiscuously towards the group round the horses. Had he not been the worst shot in creation he must assuredly have hit some one, but despite his painstaking efforts every shot

fell wide—possibly because, in his whole-hearted anxiety to effect a general massacre, he endeavoured to aim at every one at once.

With a roar of laughter Lefroy rode at him and knocked his pistols out of his grasp. Then he slipped from his horse and pinioned him.

"That's enough fancy shooting for one night," he cried. "Tie them up, Jim, and get to work on the mails."

In a few minutes the prisoners were secured, and they turned to rifle the coach. On the back seat stood a strongly-bound black box. Lefroy lifted it on to the ground and began to work at the straps which secured it. Peter and Jim drew near, curious to see the contents. Suddenly the old gentleman sprang to his feet, and flung himself violently at the Captain, kicking him and buffeting him with his head in a mad paroxysm of rage.

With a laugh Jim caught him in his arms.

"Steady, steady," he cried. "Why, what a rare old cock it is! Be quick, Captain, or he will have apoplexy. Gently, gently, my beauty,—you surely wouldn't want to hurt me?"

The last strap was unfastened,—Lefroy threw wide the box.

With a cry of surprise he started back and stared at the contents.

Coiled in the black box lay a long hempen rope and noose!

For a full minute the men stood silent, staring blankly down at this gruesome symbol of the doom which ever stood menacingly in their path. Then Lefroy flung back his head and broke into a roar of laughter.

"Smoked us!" he cried. "By the holy St Patrick! were ever men better fooled? To fight like the devil for ten minutes and then reward us with the hemp. What a tale for the boys! You've roasted us fairly this time, sir. Egad! you're a rare spirit, a man after my own heart. I'm proud to make your acquaintance."

He clapped his prisoner heartily on the back, and broke into another shout of laughter, in which Jim joined. It seemed strange to Peter to watch these two men, whom

fate might any day bring to the gallows, holding their sides with laughter at sight of the symbolic hemp. But familiarity is everything; men who walk hand in hand with death reckon little of skull and cross-bones.

The elderly practical joker chuckled complacently.

"Ever since my mails were rifled last month I've been riding the roads in hopes to meet some of you rogues," he said. "I vowed I'd be even with you. I'd give you something worth fighting for."

"What! if the highwayman won't come to the halter you'll bring the halter to the highwayman, eh?" laughed Lefroy.

"But why the devil did you offer such a resistance," grumbled Jim. "With any luck you should have shot us both."

"That is what I hoped to do."

"But the jest would have been wasted."

"Not it, Jim," interposed Lefroy; "there would have lain the cream of the joke. Two knights of the road to meet their death fighting for a sight of the halter." He threw back his head and laughed again with rare enjoyment.

Jim looked doubtful. "What shall we do with him?" he asked. "String him up?"

The old gentleman chuckled.

"My very good friend, the Sheriff, has wagered me £100 (to be paid to my heirs) I'll never trick you and live to tell the tale," he said coolly.

Again Lefroy clapped him enthusiastically on the back.

"You shan't lose your wager through me. Egad!" he added regretfully, "what a pity you are an honest man! What a highwayman you would have made! I'm proud to meet you, sir. I wish we could enjoy more of your society, but under the circumstances that is hardly possible. However, we may meet again."

"I desire nothing more heartily, you rascal. Send me word when you are to be hanged and I'll come to the entertainment. Hanged you will be; it were a blot on the country if a rogue like you should die in his bed."

Lefroy shrugged his shoulders. "I shall die even at such

time and in such manner as Heaven wills," he said calmly. "If on the gallows, what then? 'Tis a speedy death, and I'd be the last to deprive my fellow-countrymen of a little innocent amusement. But we detain you. Loose the servants, Jim, and tie up the traces. We must take the firearms, sir,—it's only a wise precaution with such a ready shot as yourself."

They unbound their prisoners, and with the help of the servants cut away the carcasses of the dead horses, and set the coach on its way. Lefroy threw a postboy a couple of crowns and bade him see to his fellow-postilion; but whether the money was designed as balm for the cracked crown of the one, or reward for the neutrality of the other, were a nice question.

The highwaymen mounted their horses and waited for the coach to proceed.

"Good evening," said Lefroy. "Your wry lies clear. A pleasant journey to you. And if our next meeting be on Tyburn Hill—why, it will send me out of the world with a laugh, and pleasant recollections of a rare jester."

The old gentleman leaned out of the coach and held out his hand to Lefroy.

"Shake hands, you rascal," he said. "Stap me! you may be a rogue, a damned rogue, but, egad! you're a true blade. Heaven forgive me, if I don't hope you may cheat the gallows yet. Whip up there, fellows—I must go and claim my £100 from the Sheriff."

With another chuckle this eccentric old joker fell back in his seat, and the coach rolled on.

The three horsemen sat motionless, hat in hand, till the coach had disappeared. Then Lefroy pulled off his mask and turned to face Jim. Every trace of laughter had vanished, his eyes were hard, his lips set and stern.

"If it were any other man in the world than Tom Eccles I'd shoot him at sight for this," he said grimly. "But——"

"It's a sheer impossibility, Captain, that Tom should play the traitor," urged Jim eagerly. "He must have had some other reason for leaving us."

"He'll need to give a devilish good reason for such rank

desertion," growled Lefroy. "However—he shall have time to speak."

They turned their horses heads and set out for home. Scarcely had they galloped a dozen strides when they heard a shout behind them, and looking round they saw Tom Eccles riding towards them out of the wood, a pistol in one hand, a drawn sword in the other.

"Heaven keep us!" muttered Jim. "Here's old Tom gone clean crazy."

Without a word Lefroy wheeled his horse, drew his sword, and rode full at his whilom follower.

"It's death to them both," groaned Jim, staring after him.

Tom Eccles checked his horse and quietly waited Lefroy's coming. But when the captain was within three yards of him he suddenly threw down his pistol, slipped off his horse, and holding his sword by the blade offered it to his chief.

Lefroy drew his horse back on its haunches, and stared down at the man. "What's this, then?" he asked sharply.

"My sword," answered Eccles simply.

With a frown Lefroy took the sword and broke it across his crupper.

"When a sword has once failed me I do not use it again," he said shortly.

Eccles nodded. "I know that," he said quietly. "But you still have your own sword, Captain." So saying he clasped his hands behind his back and fixed his eyes on the distant horizon.

Lefroy drew back his sword for the stroke, but Jim galloped up and laid a hand upon his arm.

"Gad! you're a hard man, Michael Lefroy," he muttered.

Lefroy's lips twitched. He hesitated. "You deserted Eccles?" he asked sharply.

"I did," answered Tom, "and I'm here to pay the price."

The captain sat a moment silent, staring down at him. Then he pointed with his sword to where Eccles' pistol lay on the grass.

"Pick it up," he said curtly; "he past gives you so much right, and you are as good shot as I am."

"No," said Tom stubbornly, shaking his head. "I ran away,—I'll take the consequences."

"Pick it up and be damned to you!" roared Lefroy. "By Heaven, you're not yet free from your oath; I'll be obeyed."

Reluctantly Tom Eccles picked up his pistol and turned to mount his horse.

"Ride towards the wood," said Lefroy briefly. "I'll go west. When Jim fires his pistol, turn and shoot. Give us short range, Jim."

"But, hang it all, Captain——" began Jim.

"I'll shoot you too if you say another word," interrupted Lefroy grimly.

Jim drew his pistol, and they wheeled their horses.

Peter Wildmore drew near. "Er—one moment, Captain Lefroy," he said politely.

"Don't you interfere, Lord Wildmore," said Lefroy sharply.

"Not for worlds," answered Peter coolly. "You can shoot the whole company for all I care; but—unless you'd have me die of curiosity, for Heaven's sake, before you stop his mouth for ever, ask him—er—why he ran away."

"W—why?" stammered Lefroy.

"Gad! yes. Why he ran away," repeated Peter coolly.

Lefroy turned to Eccles. "Why did you, Tom?" he asked slowly.

"I was afraid," answered Tom simply.

"That's a lie," interrupted Jim. "The man doesn't walk this earth who could scare you."

"Yes—one," answered Eccles, "and he was in that coach."

"Who the devil was he, then?" cried Lefroy.

"My father."

"Y—your father! What! that rare old blade your father?"

"Yes, the old sportsman!" muttered Tom tenderly. "He couldn't hit a haystack at a dozen yards—but—he's the gamest old cock. He kicked me out of the house because I told him his new mare was spavined—and I was right."

too. You've a right to kill me, Mike,—I deserted; but I'm hanged if I wouldn't do the same again. Directly I saw his fierce old head at the window, stap me! if I didn't feel like a boy caught stealing apples. I couldn't face it, and that's the simple truth."

"But why the plague didn't you tell me this before?" asked Lefroy.

Eccles shrugged his shoulders. "You didn't give me overmuch time, Captain. Besides, there's no denying I ran away. I deserve to be shot."

Lefroy dropped his pistol into his holster, and laughed softly.

"Come away home, Tom Eccles," he cried. "You are as mad as your father. But you are a trifle better shot. Both horses clean through the head—not bad that—at full gallop."

"You did a neat little piece of winging yourself, Captain."

Lefroy shrugged his shoulders. "Target work," he said. Then he turned to Peter. Lord Wildmore presented a somewhat disreputable appearance. His coat was torn, his forehead cut and bleeding, a large green and yellow bump already disfigured one eye. Lefroy laughed.

"A hot corner—eh, my lord? What do you think of night riding now?"

Peter pushed back his hat and pressed his hand to his throbbing brow.

"Egad! honesty is undoubtedly the safer policy," he said, with a smile. "But, 'pon my soul, it's plaguey dull."

Lefroy nodded thoughtfully. In silence they galloped over the dreaming downs. Presently the lights of the house glimmered in the distance.

Lefroy drew rein suddenly and turned to Peter.

"Look you, Lord Wildmore," he said, "you stood by us well to-night. Hang me if I won't trust you with our lives, and go surety for you myself to the company. So here's your choice. Marry Biddy if you will. I'll trust her to you right gladly; and, mark me, she'll make you the most loyal wife in England—save one. But, if you'd

rather not wear the ring, but live free and ride alone, why, down yonder lies the Abbey—your way is clear.”

For fully three minutes Peter sat silent, gazing at the glimmering lights, weighing his choice.

On the one hand lay the cheery bachelor days, the careless, jovial, untrammelled existence, with no life to reckon save his own, none to please but himself, no ambitions, no enemies, no friends but of his own choosing. To live free and ride alone, the wide world for his hunting-ground, none to call him to account! To take his pleasure of all men, and win a few true friends to share his last bottle and give him a hearty send-off when he must pass out into the dark! What more could a man ask of life?

And in the other side of the scale was only a girl's face, deep trusting eyes beneath dark level brows, and the memory of a girl's voice whispering softly, “God has made me love you, my lord. Will you not marry me now?”

He laughed at his hesitation; for is not the world full of women? And a woman's love—what is it compared with a man's freedom?

And yet—a man grows old, his arm weakens, his taste stales, his stories cease to amuse. Old friends marry and live in their children. He feels himself growing prosy and verbose. His day passes. And when age comes, when pleasures fade and freedom loses its sweetness, were it not something to have such loving eyes to turn to, such loving words to cheer him through the gloom? Were it not something, when ambition dies and a man's courage weakens, to have sons to send out into the world to take up the life he leaves? Surely it were something—much—when Night draws near and the world grows cold, to sit at home with loving hearts about him and dream of the past.

Truly a bachelor lives free, but he rides alone—alone into the dark.

So Peter mused, looking into the future, weighing his choice.

Marvellous indeed are the ways of man, manifold are the motives that shape his course. Many a time a man will waver long, weighing the deepest arguments, and will at last be moved to make his choice by the merest straw in

the scale. So it befell with Peter Wildmore. For as he sat in doubt, thinking now on the merry life of the past, now on the face of Biddy Lefroy, his eyes rested on his signet-ring and on the motto thereon engraved—*Vestigia nulla retrorsum*.

With a start he read the words and accepted the omen. What manner of Wildmore were he to turn back from what he had once resolved?

He wheeled his horse and set his face to the house.

"I will ride indeed to the Abbey," he said softly, "but with Biddy Lefroy by my side."

The company were assembled at the gate when they rode up to the house, Juliet and Biddy mounted in their midst. They lost no time in setting out. The moon was already low in the west; if they wished light for their ride they must not delay.

They wheeled out of the gate and galloped over the silent downs. The men were in wild spirits. The good supper and good wine, followed by this mad ride through the clear, cool night, intoxicated them: they played pranks on each other as they rode, and laughed and sang like a pack of schoolboys.

Peter rode in the middle of the rout of men. He watched Biddy's figure swaying in the saddle as she galloped ahead with her brother, and he nodded with satisfaction. At least they would have one taste in common—his bride was a horsewoman.

They rode at full gallop. The shadowy downs flew past them, the wind sang in their ears, the wild rush of hoofs thundered on the grass. Peter's heart beat high with exultation, he laughed aloud. Even thus it seemed to him should every lusty bachelor ride to his wedding, if wedded he must be: one wild rush of freedom and then—the ring.

VII.

Moorstone Abbey lay silent in the moonlight. The household slept the sleep of well-fed, under-worked servitors. Connell, James, and Mrs Wood the housekeeper, having fully

discussed their master's conduct with many dubious head-shakings over a good bottle of wine, had at length retired to their well-earned slumbers. Each of Lord Wildmore's fair guests had withdrawn to the solitude of her own chamber. The house was still.

The evening had not proved exactly frolicsome. Lady Betty Acton and her companions had journeyed down from London in full anticipation of an entertaining and agreeable visit. Whatever might be said of Peter Wildmore as a marrying man, none had ever questioned his capacity as a host, and when Betty thoughtfully ordained that her coach should break down at the gates of the Abbey, it was in sure anticipation of a hospitable welcome.

But though their welcome was as ardent and obsequious as the united efforts of Connell and Mrs Wood could contrive, it scarcely proved equal to her ladyship's expectations. For, alas! her quarry had flown, and in place of spending a merry evening baiting Lord Wildmore, the disappointed fair ones found themselves condemned to pass the dreary hours alone together.

The consequences were disturbing to the peace. Lady Betty was blessed with a tongue, Clarissa Winston with a sneering smile, Belle Steward with a mocking spirit. The conjunction of the three resulted in many vigorous passages. The conversation was never dull.

By ten o'clock the mental atmosphere was explosive.

Clarissa yawned openly in the middle of one of Lady Betty's most humorous stories, and the latter told Miss Steward it was really remarkable what a lack of humour characterised most of her sex. Clarissa thereupon advanced the opinion that though a sense of humour might occasionally be lacking, humour was more often marred by want of taste. Lady Betty responded with the quotation of our royal motto, and Belle Steward laughed in an irritating manner and hummed a few bars of "Doves are courting!"

Fortunately in the nick of time Connell appeared with the candles, and the ladies bade one another a cold good-night.

Lady Betty Acton lay long awake, musing on the mean-

ing of Lord Wildmore's disappearance and weaving fresh plots for his undoing.

About midnight, just as she was sinking into peaceful slumber, she was startled by the sound of galloping hoofs—a troop of horsemen, so it would seem, sweeping round the front of the house.

Betty sat up in bed and listened, but the riders had passed and all was still.

Again she settled herself on her pillows and wooed sleep. But now her mind was besieged with recollections of the ghost stories of the countryside, of headless riders taking the air on moonlit nights, of spectral troops of horsemen, of spirits of ancient highwaymen haunting the scenes of their former triumphs. She grew nervous, imaginative; she strained her ears eagerly through the silence and started at every sound.

Suddenly, just below her windows, a horse neighed. For a second her heart thumped violently, then, laughing at her fears, she jumped out of bed and ran to the window. The front of the house was in shadow—she could see nothing. All seemed quiet, and she was turning back to bed when her eyes rested on the Chapel that formed the left wing of the house. With amazement she noted that its windows were alight, and looking down she could distinguish shadows moving behind the pictured glass. Her curiosity was instantly aroused. Who might be these mysterious worshippers haunting the Chapel at midnight? Spectres, or men of flesh and blood? In either case worth investigation, Betty opined.

With sudden determination she drew on cloak and slippers and hurried to Miss Steward's room. For whether they prove men or ghosts Betty deemed it wiser to have a companion in her espionage.

Belle Steward was fast asleep, half buried in the pillows. Betty seized her unceremoniously by the shoulders and shook her into wakefulness.

"Get up, Belle!" she said. "Here's the Chapel full o' ghosts and heaven knows what besides. Get up and look at them."

Belle sat up and rubbed her eyes.

"Ghosts!" she exclaimed, looking wildly round the room. "Ghosts! Where?"

"In the Chapel yonder."

"And a very proper place for them," answered Belle firmly; "let them stay there, Betty."

But Betty was not to be outdone in firmness. With one relentless hand she stripped off the covering of the bed, with the other she handed Miss Steward her slippers.

"I shall go into the gallery and look at them," she said resolutely. "Then I shall have seen more than any other woman in town."

"I have always heard that ghosts resent prying," objected Belle. Nevertheless she rose and meekly followed her guide.

Betty knew the Abbey well. She quickly led the way down two long passages, to the door which opened into the gallery at the west end of the Chapel.

As she pushed open the door she stopped suddenly, for the words, "Wilt thou take this woman to be thy wedded wife?" rang through the silence.

"Lack a mercy, Belle!" she muttered. "The ghosts are marrying!"

The curtains were drawn in front of the gallery. The two girls crept forward, and kneeling by the rail peeped through the folds.

A strange sight met their eyes. In the nave were a dozen men booted and spurred, their whips in their hands. Their stalwart figures offered substantial evidence that here was no ghosts' wedding. All stood silent, immovable, their eyes fixed on the figures of bride and bridegroom kneeling at the chancel steps. Father Stevens, looking but half awake, was officiating at the altar. Connell and Mrs Wood, blinking and staring, arrayed in garments suggestive rather of a burlesque than a wedding-feast, stood to the right of the kneeling pair. The bridegroom was hidden by the tall figure of the man behind him. The bride, in riding dress, also had her back to the gallery.

Betty clutched Belle's arm.

"It's a wedding," she muttered. "A live wedding! Oh! Belle, who is the bridegroom? Is it—could it be——?"

Even as she spoke her suspicions were confirmed. The well-known voice of Peter Wildmore, with the familiar hesitating little stammer, rang through the chapel, plighting his troth.

With a stifled cry Betty dropped the curtains and fell back off her fald-stool, dragging her companion with her.

"It is!" she gasped. "It's Peter Wildmore being wedded. Belle, are we awake?"

Belle Steward rubbed her eyes. "I—I think so," she said doubtfully.

Betty rose, seized her hand, and pulled her through the door of the gallery. In the passage without they turned and faced each other. There were tears in Betty's eyes, desperation was writ large on every feature.

"Belle," she said solemnly, "was ever poor Christian woman so cruelly plagued? Here is Peter Wildmore being married under my very nose, and here am I—in my night-rail—and cannot go down and interfere!"

All impotent strivings against the tyranny of convention, all the oppression of woman's destiny, all the disappointment of thwarted hopes, echoed in that cry. Truly this was tragedy indeed! Here was Lady Betty Acton, arch-interferer in other folk's affairs, full of deep purposes, big with enterprise, held prisoner in her room by so simple a matter as a night-gown. What deeper revenge could the Fates have taken upon one whose only fault was a desire to share their work?

Peter Wildmore was married. Father Stevens had blessed the couple and returned to his bed. Connell and Mrs Wood, still half distrustful of the evidence of their eyes and ears, had retired to prepare rooms for their new mistress. The Masquers had mounted and ridden away to take the road again. Peter was alone with his wife.

They stood on the steps in the wide hall doorway, gazing out into the darkness.

Peter turned and looked at his new possession, a little doubtful what to do with her. Wives are kittle cattle!

"So," he said thoughtfully, "we are married. Are you not afraid, madame?"

"Afraid? I? Why so?"

"I was tricked into marrying you, but you are my wife now, and—a man likes his revenge."

She laughed softly. "You married me because I loved you, my Lord Wildmore. Does a woman show love by fearing her husband?"

He caught her hands in his. "Bravely spoken!" he cried. "But if you do not fear me, what of the future, Biddy? The rocks, the shoals, the quicksands that beset married life? It's a plaguey difficult course to steer, child. Do you see no cause for fear there?"

She looked into his eyes and smiled.

"Do you set the course, Peter," she said; "I will follow, whatsoever rocks may lie in our path. So, if we sink or swim, it will be together."

"Why, here's a wife!" cried Peter exultantly. "What man taught you this?"

Biddy laughed softly. "Who but yourself, my lord? For sure, if a man show himself worthy to be followed, a woman can do no better than follow him all the days of her life."

The Benedict took his wife in his arms and kissed her heartily.

They turned and went up into the house together, and shut out the night.

THE END.

